

Principal magazine presents

# LEADING LESSONS

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## Social-Emotional Learning in the Time of COVID-19



Revising Instructional Skills and Strategies

Building Adult Competencies

SEL and Social Justice

naesp

National Association of  
Elementary School  
**Principals**

A special supplement to  
*Principal* magazine

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# LEADING LESSONS

## Social-Emotional Learning in the Time of COVID-19

- 1 Introduction**
- 2 Revising Instructional Skills and Strategies**  
Ensure that SEL remains a priority, even when circumstances change
- 6 Building Adult Competencies**  
Attend to teachers' own social-emotional learning to benefit students
- 10 SEL and Social Justice**  
A call to action toward a more equitable world
- 13 Resources**

As you read this supplement, be on the lookout for the following:



**Key considerations:**

These are factors to keep in mind for any school looking to develop or hone its SEL program.



**Reflections:** These are questions to ask yourself when looking to develop or hone an SEL program for your particular school and circumstances.

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## INTRODUCTION

# Sustainable Support Amid Disruption

Even before 2020, the promise of social-emotional learning (SEL) was tempered by challenges. Research proves the power of SEL to instill self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, all for academic benefits. But effectiveness demands sufficient exposure and intensity, integration into daily practices, extension beyond the classroom, and delivery by highly trained staff.

Then a fateful year amplified those challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic closed schools. Protests forced a painful reckoning with systemic racism while raising hope for meaningful change. Just when students needed self-regulation and empathy, they were separated from daily exposure to the tenets of social-emotional learning.

Since the emergence of SEL as a tool for academic achievement through holistic education, initiatives and research from The Wallace Foundation have helped principals find the options best suited to their schools and students. The principals interviewed for this guide had already been customizing SEL models when 2020 changed everything. Now, these school leaders reveal that SEL can be sustained, even amid disruption. All have systematically implemented SEL in recent years. To do so, they assessed the needs of their schools and solicited staff input. They reviewed data and set goals that guided the final choice of SEL program. They

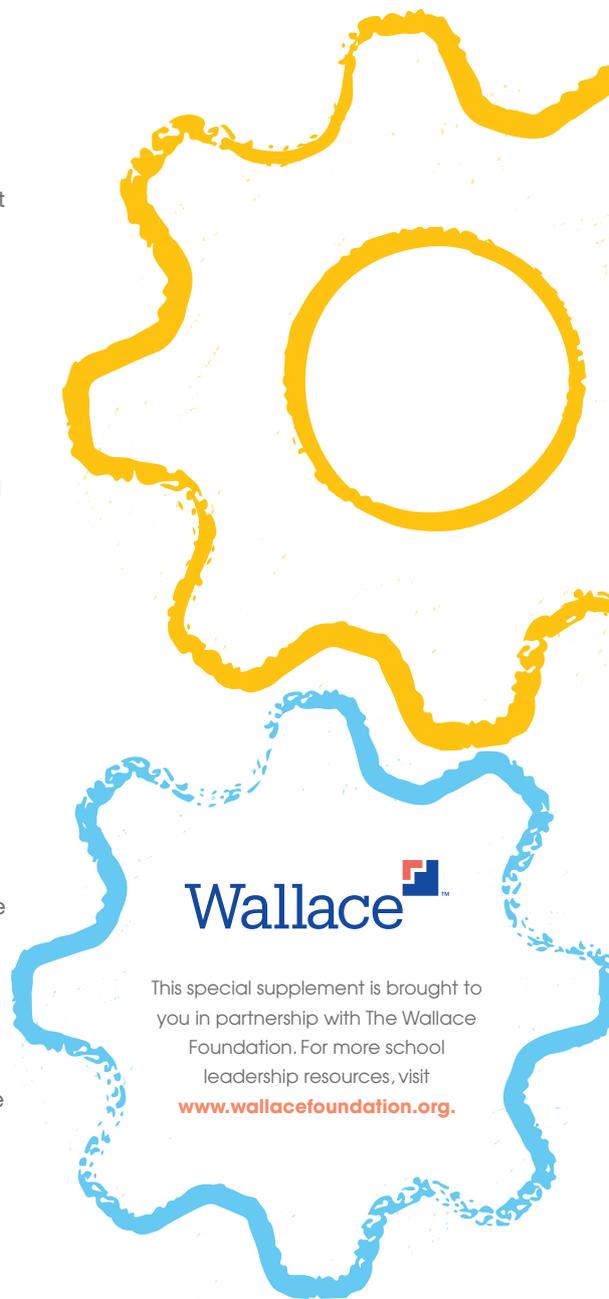
were still testing the parameters of SEL but were confident in buy-in from students, teachers, and families. More importantly, they were seeing results in improved student attitudes and behavior.

Meticulous implementation prepared them—to the extent possible—for the shutdown and upheavals of 2020. They did not sacrifice SEL in the quest for grade-level rigor. Many actually prioritized SEL, calculating that their students and families needed structure to survive the challenges of an unprecedented time.

The pandemic prodded principals to further their mindfulness of the personhood embodied in every student. SEL frameworks offered guidance for selecting the areas of concentration and maintaining momentum. The next step is incorporating SEL more fully into the lives of schools.

“If we’re really being serious about SEL, then the whole entirety of the day, the whole entirety of the urgency in which we move, needs to shift as well,” says Cesar Rivera, principal at Samuels Elementary School in Denver who was part of The Wallace Foundation’s Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative. “It can’t still be about assessments that haven’t changed to meet this moment of pandemic and combating racism in our country.”

Lessons learned provide navigational tools for going forward. Gleaned from crisis, they help elementary principals hone their SEL practices to a sharper edge for brighter days. ⚙️



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# REVISING INSTRUCTIONAL Skills & Strategies

Social-emotional learning (SEL) empowers children to participate in classroom activities, strengthen friendships, and maintain positive relationships with teachers. However, virtual learning and reordered classrooms ruptured the very target areas that SEL addresses. Principals from across the nation who were interviewed for this report, including Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative participants, say that devoting strategic attention to student connections signals to learners, families, and staff that SEL remains a priority, even when circumstances change.

## Prioritizing SEL Amid Crisis

SEL teaches adaptability. When the pandemic arrived, schools adapted. Those well established in the process discovered the capabilities to prioritize SEL within daily operations.

## Encourage student engagement

Classroom engagement can be sustained while delivering instruction across remote platforms.

- Retain classroom routines and rituals, but give teachers the flexibility to recognize when students need a break from the screen. Maximizing synchronous instruction makes room for asynchronous playtime or snack breaks.
- Leverage the home as classroom. Send students on scavenger hunts around the house or let them introduce the family dog.
- Remind children that they are part of the school community. Send a hand-written postcard or drop in on remote classrooms to say hello.



## Key Considerations:

**While conducting remote learning, watch for actionable insights into aspects of home life that could be adversely impacting a student's social-emotional development and academics.**

## Build social skills

Virtual and hybrid school days can offer unstructured periods when children learn to navigate social norms.

- Transfer anchor protocols such as restorative circles to remote classrooms. Continue building social contracts and revisit the agreements children make for how to interact.
- As schools reopen and restructure, give teachers the chance to take children out for breaks, during which they can observe student interaction in small groups.
- Maintain links among students who are separated by hybrid learning. For instance, when classes are divided into half-days, post photos of classmates in the rooms.

## Expand SEL to all

Pandemic-related pressures are accelerating the awareness that SEL is for all children, including those who don't show outward signs of distress.

- Broadly apply preventive measures from SEL programs that teach students to recognize unhealthy emotions and respond appropriately.
- Train staff to interact across virtual platforms with all students, not just those who manifest certain behaviors. Assessing students across domains of home, mental health, and behavior can reveal why they're struggling academically.
- Create a continuum of support, brainstorming resources that can be called upon from the school, district, and surrounding community.
- Share the self-regulation strategies of SEL with families for transport into the home and rebound back into the classroom.
- Build shared understanding of SEL principles and implementation with out-of-school-time (OST) staff through professional development content applicable in school and OST settings. Offer the training at separate times to accommodate the differing schedules of the two groups.



### Key Considerations:

**Sustain the common language of SEL among remote learners. Although there might be fewer conflicts to mediate among classmates, clashes with siblings and parents demand resolution.**



### Reflection Questions:

- Lingering crises can send the pendulum swinging if priorities aren't established. Is the pendulum balanced between SEL and academics at my school?
- How can I better utilize time when the school is not in crisis in order to prepare for the next emergency?

### The Shift to Remote Learning

While remote and hybrid learning have disrupted traditional schooling, they also reinforce the importance of SEL by pulling back the curtain on children's lives and daily challenges. Strengthening relationships remains the bedrock of SEL success.

#### Build student connections

Intentionality prevents SEL practices from losing momentum when school days are disrupted.

- Carve out daily time for SEL practices that encourage discussion. Students can talk about their favorite foods, their feelings about quarantine, or customs in their native countries, all in the effort to build trust and comfort in virtual settings.
- When classroom conflict or bad habits surface, teachers can recircle the group to discuss the matter.
- Before tackling the learning-slide aspects of school shutdowns,

prioritize SEL as a tool for gauging student feelings. Do they feel known, cared for, and loved? Programs that help students label and express emotions create openings to carve out meaningful relationships.

- Provide explicit guidance on integrating SEL instruction into school-day academics and OST activities. Include lesson plans and model activities that instructors can easily implement across subject areas and types of activities.



### Key Considerations:

**Use age-appropriate approaches when adapting SEL to remote learning. Create small-group breakouts for older students who might shy from speaking up in large groups. Young students might just want time to say hi to each other before diving into lessons.**

**Principals who had carefully matched SEL programs to their school cultures felt better prepared to pivot when the pandemic disrupted daily routines.**

#### Sustain the school community

Every school is imbued with a culture, and its students adhere to a set of core values akin to SEL competencies—even amid a pandemic.

- Maintain student recognition programs. Use free online survey tools to solicit nominations from teachers of students whose actions demonstrate adherence to school values.
- In reopened schools, teachers who teach half-sized classes in person on certain days can convene the other half—those learning remotely that day—in order to retain student connections.
- Regularly survey parents and staff about changes they see in the children and watch for trends. Survey students about their impressions of the school climate and teacher responsiveness.



### Key Considerations:

**Children who require intensive interventions can be especially sensitive to disruption. Concentrate school psychologists, nurses, and other health care professionals on their needs. Work through virtual means with families and community partners to provide stability and social supports.**

**For continuity in students' days, use SEL coaches to support school and OST staff as they implement new SEL programs and practices.**

## The School as a Community Hub

Whether learning is delivered in person or remotely, the school remains a hub



### Key Considerations:

**As learning extends beyond the school walls, consider using grant funds for household needs. One principal used CARES Act funds to buy 1:1 devices for her young students whose parents opted out of in-person instruction but lacked adequate in-home technology.**

for parents, guardians, and community partners collaborating on the personal and academic growth of children.

#### Family affair

Parents might be demanding academic rigor in remote and hybrid learning, but educators recognize that many children are in equal need of the safe space they lost. Rebuilding the connections needed for social-emotional stability requires linking with families in meaningful ways.

- Continue teaching parents the tools and techniques of SEL, applying SEL frameworks across platforms. With families spending more time together, attention paid to common language, alternative discipline, breathing exercises, and self-regulation can sustain SEL practices and promote healthier household relationships.
- Recognize that parents feel isolated, too. Partner with parent-teacher groups to hold grade-level remote meetings, allowing parents to



### Reflection Questions:

- Am I setting the expectation that all teachers connect with each of their parents?
- Are teachers getting the supports needed to make those calls and contacts happen?

express their feelings and see that other parents—and school staff—share the same struggles.

- When sending parent surveys, explain how the information will be used and share the results.

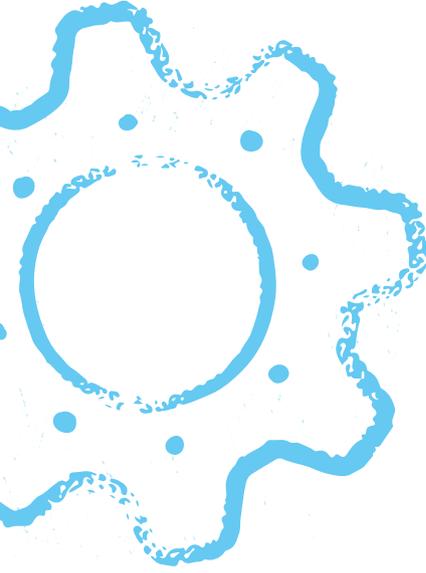
#### Reinforce partnerships

The partnerships crucial to SEL success took on heightened importance during the pandemic, helping overwhelmed school staff reach students whose challenges were amplified by quarantine.

- Mental health partners can provide teletherapy for patients from the school community. In some circumstances, school staff worked with partners to help children who were struggling with remote learning.
- To counter the pandemic's intensification of summer slide and loss of relationship-building opportunities, schools work with OST programs to provide programming in small-group settings—which are run according to strict safety protocols—for students known to be at risk academically.
- Apply remote-learning methods to one-on-one and small-group mentorship and tutoring OST programs. ⚙️



# BUILDING ADULT Competencies



Bewilderment isn't exclusive to children during trying times. Every day that COVID-19 rages, teachers face unprecedented challenges for which few were trained. Findings from The Wallace Foundation's "Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School-Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning" and from CASEL's "Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening School" show that attending to teachers' own social-emotional learning (SEL) practices is often a starting place for integrating them into pedagogical practices—or as one principal says, "You put on your own oxygen mask first."

#### **Instill confidence**

Teachers shouldn't have to feel that they are the sole problem solvers for children and their SEL needs. Lifelines and fully stocked SEL toolbelts equip them to contribute to solutions without having to take on problems by themselves.

- Don't assume that students understand why their learning experience is constantly changing. Have teachers explain the circumstances and share a predictable agenda. Extract student perspectives by leading children in discussions about what a pandemic—or any other crisis at hand—means to them.
- Crisis acts in blanket form, touching



the lives of all children. Apply training in trauma-informed care to classroom practices, giving each student reason to feel safe, connected, and hopeful.

- Build capabilities in teachers to recognize warning signs from students who are especially vulnerable to the consequences of upheaval. Children with preexisting conditions such as anxiety and attention deficit disorder can have a heightened sensitivity to external stressors, while those whose family members are frontline caregivers or at high risk of contracting COVID-19 can harbor justifiable fears for the health of loved ones. Equip teachers to offer available supports to families

and to partner with school mental health professionals on appropriate ways to reach out.

- Develop a simple rating system allowing teachers to gauge student needs and risks in snapshot form.
- Invest in premium versions of online meeting platforms, creating breakout rooms and small-group discussions that allow staff to conduct in-depth examinations of changes demanded by COVID-19 and the racial justice movement.
- Encourage teachers to mine the full potential of online meeting platforms by letting them know that it's OK to try new things and make mistakes.



### Key Considerations:

**Give teachers the freedom to prioritize student well-being over compliance with academic assignments and behavioral expectations. Devise professional development plans that stock their SEL toolbelts with all the practices needed to engage students, assess their needs, and find resources that contribute to solutions.**



### Reflection Questions:

- Is my school's SEL program preparing teachers for the hard task of encouraging students to share their feelings about the pandemic and social justice?
- Am I utilizing all available tools to empower staff to talk honestly with children and find the resources to address any problems that surface?

### Enlighten and empower

As the CASEL SEL Roadmap for Reopening School states, adults need opportunities to connect, heal, and build their capacity to support students.

- Devote time during in-service training to reflection around adult SEL. Lead staff in exploring how much of their self-worth is defined by routine classroom wins when visible signs of daily success are no longer guaranteed.
- Remind teachers that shared trauma doesn't impact students only. Guide them in looking inward for its impact on their own bodies and well-being,

and encourage them to seek help when they need it.

- Start all staff meetings, from leadership teams to professional learning communities, with moments to check in on each other's well-being.
- When scattered classrooms prevent principals from reading the pulse of the school and its classes for student SEL needs, rely on teachers and support staff for frank assessments. Supply them with resources such as journal articles and books to build their sensitivities to the signs that impending problems need attention.
- Partnerships with out-of-school-time (OST) programs can create continuity and consistency that reinforce SEL principles throughout the child's day. Time constraints can make scheduling meetings with OST staff difficult, but face-to-face meetings—adapted to remote channels in pandemic circumstances—help build trust and understanding.



### Key Considerations:

**Remind teachers that their priority is teaching people, not content. As you develop OST partnerships, include protected time for SEL in the master schedule, realistically allocating according to transition times and arrivals, plus student energy levels as the day progresses.**



### Reflection Question:

- Am I remaining fluid and open to suggestions for effective practices to promote the safety of my school community and its physical and social-emotional health?

### Foster communications

Assure teachers you're doing your best to keep them and their families safe, and back up those assurances with facts and action.

- Assign distinct purposes to different types of meetings. Consider keeping full staff meetings light and fun—one principal used her kids' karaoke mic to lead a game of "Family Feud"—or for shared contemplation over things that have been lost because of the pandemic. Open small-group meetings to discussions about the well-being of students and colleagues, plus possible solutions.
- Build the kind of trust with your leadership team that empowers members to tell you when you've missed a step in the safety-precaution checklist or when teachers need a better explanation of school protocols.
- Create buy-in by sharing the research and science behind your decisions.
- Turnover happens. Document and formalize SEL procedures—perhaps a short list of desired, observable

behaviors and “do-now” activities—to memorialize them as school and OST staff change.



### Key Considerations:

**Even in normal times, you will never please everyone, and crises can divide stakeholders even more. Seek the guidance of team members who can share thoughts on how to present plans, including those handed down by district administration or public authorities, in a digestible form that gives staff a say in implementation.**

#### Assure self-care

A culture of self-care gives staff permission to take time for themselves and their colleagues, recognizing that their health lays the foundation for the educational and social-emotional progress of their students.

- When reopening and adapting to changing safety precautions, schedule ample time for teachers to set up their rooms and absorb the meaning and logistics behind the physical changes demanded by COVID-19 protocols.
- Apply the school’s SEL practices to gauging and improving staff social-emotional health. If teachers use the RULER scale of emotional

intelligence, ask them what color they’re in and craft responses that address the mood of the moment, helping teachers reach a better color state through meditative practices or walks around the block.

- Use survey tools that allow teachers to privately submit updates on their well-being and requests for help.
- Train staff in appropriately handling stress through breathing, yoga, and mindfulness strategies. The training can also model practices that teachers can transfer to their students.
- Include teachers and support staff in school programs that recognize members of the community who personify school values. ⚙️



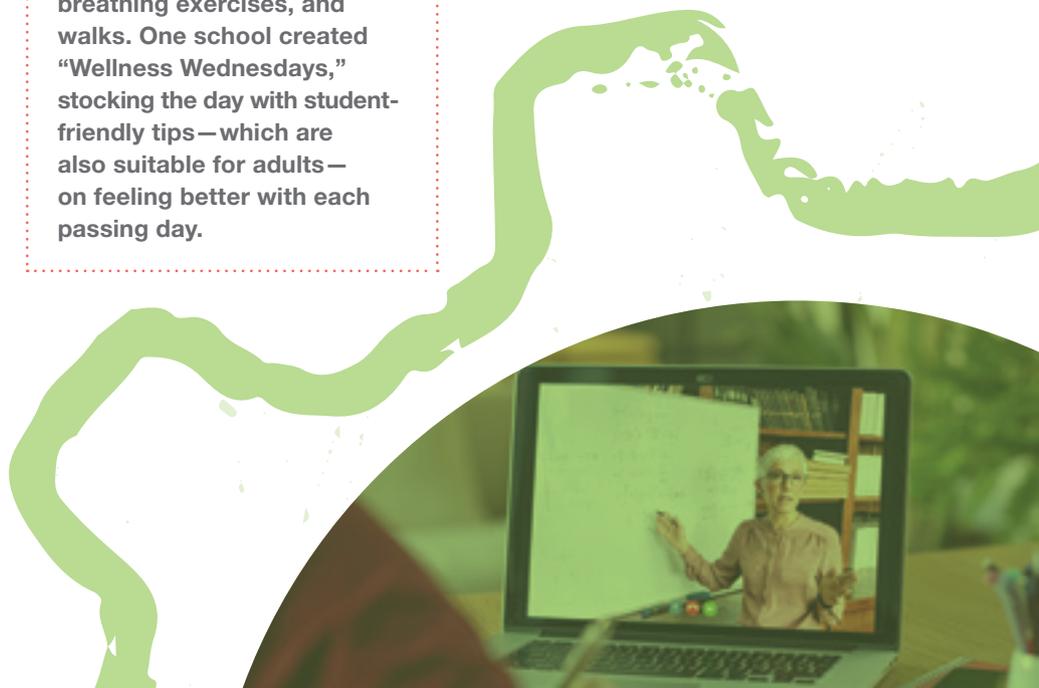
### Key Considerations:

**Make self-care intentional. Build times into the day and week for self-care breaks, breathing exercises, and walks. One school created “Wellness Wednesdays,” stocking the day with student-friendly tips—which are also suitable for adults—on feeling better with each passing day.**



### Reflection Questions:

- Am I modeling the wellness behavior I expect from my staff? If I’m projecting a false front that internalizes negative emotions, they will do the same—to the detriment of both themselves and their students.
- Am I giving teachers permission to stop beating themselves up about perceived failures in the face of enormous challenges? Do they know that they will be supported if they admit to feeling overwhelmed or falling short of expectations that were probably outsized to begin with?



# SEL AND Social Justice

Social-emotional learning (SEL) builds the same social skills that are now driving the racial and social justice movement—empathizing with and respecting others, navigating social conflicts effectively, and standing up for justice and fairness. While SEL initially presented itself as a methodical approach to building a social-emotional foundation for improved academic achievement, it has now become, in the words of one principal, “a call to action” toward a more equitable world.

## Create an equitable environment

Equity in education and relationships begins with an equitable classroom. When the classroom is scattered, educators are tasked with instilling equity across virtual and physical boundaries.

- Monitor involvement of remote learners and take remediate steps to bring back absentees while trying to understand and address the barriers at home that could keep students from logging in regularly.
- Choose and share texts for read-alouds that reflect the diversity of the classroom and the community. Let children see themselves and a

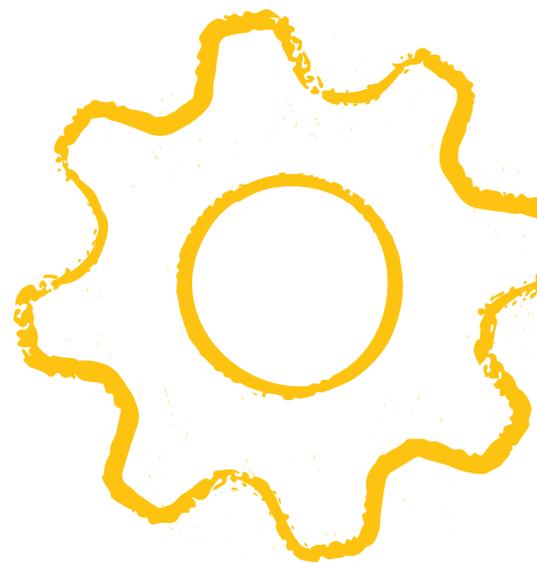
diversity of characters in their books, creating an invitation for them to strive for the SEL competencies of connecting with the lives of others and respecting differences.

- Ask students, in dialogue or by survey, if they’re feeling welcomed. Trends can indicate problems in instructional delivery that teachers should reflect upon and correct.
- Maintain and reinforce practices adopted to recognize and minimize unconscious bias. One principal adapted a social-emotional framework from [teachingtolerance.org](http://teachingtolerance.org) to generate dialogue among elementary-age students.
- Shift the discussion about bullying away from clear-cut “upstander” examples to more nuanced looks at situations that don’t seem right and the range of responses that are available.
- In hybrid schooling, consider assigning teachers solely to virtual learning settings while others remain in physical classrooms. Teachers devoted exclusively to remote learning can concentrate on building trust and rapport with students who are separated by computer screens.



## Key Considerations:

SEL practices can prompt children to share details about their lives that affect their school attendance and performance—perhaps a parent’s immigration struggles or an unsettling encounter with prejudice. Principals and teachers can use the opportunity to turn it into a lesson, perhaps assigning books on similar themes, written by authors who look like the students.





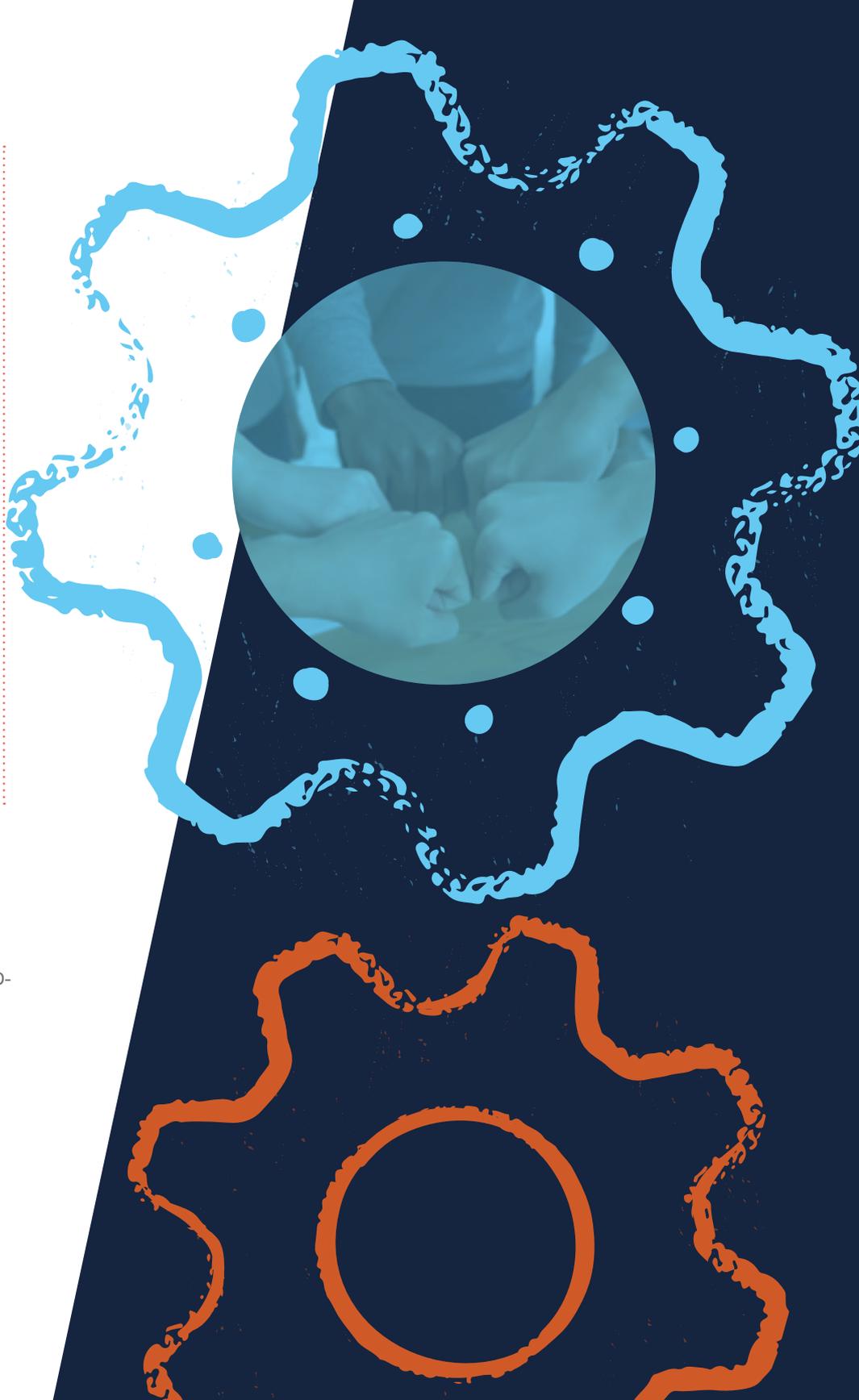
### Reflection Questions:

- Does my school teach foreign languages through the lens of world cultures and understanding different perspectives?
- Even in remote and hybrid learning, are my school practices honoring the personhood of each student, intentionally drawing connections between each child and the content they're learning in a culturally responsive way?
- In my partnerships with out-of-school-time (OST) programs, does my SEL training help school and OST staff adapt SEL to meet the needs of students with disabilities or cultural or linguistic differences?

### Encourage communication

Communication is a key component of building the understanding needed to advance racial and social justice, but in many cases, communication has fallen victim to the consequences of the COVID-19 era. Intentional strategies can keep open the lines of communication that foster understanding.

- Update families on racial justice activities underway at the school. Include parents in the initiatives to encourage their engagement.
- Continue holding community-building events, even if they



must be held virtually. At one school where a pre-COVID-19 multicultural club and annual intercultural night welcomed students and families to share the foods and customs of their cultures, one teacher developed “Worldly Wednesdays.” On those days, students learned about other cultures, starting with the cultures represented in their own classrooms.

- Share your own challenges, giving teachers and families a role model for opening up with each other about the factors in their lives that could be negatively affecting student performance.
- When students aren’t logging on for remote lessons, make the teacher—possibly more trusted than an authority figure such as an assistant principal or social worker—the first person to reach out to the family in an effort to find out why and remediate the problem.



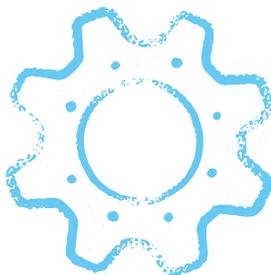
### Reflection Questions:

- How are my school’s restorative circles contributing to and reflecting the racial justice aspects of SEL? Do they offer open-ended conversations and create an atmosphere that encourages students to share what they’re feeling?
- Are teachers trained to transform difficult conversations into SEL opportunities?

### Study history

Beginning to understand the historical context of racial and ethnic oppression and its lingering effects is a necessary first step toward drawing connections between SEL and effective restorative action. Books for adults and age-appropriate books for children can help them see the evolution of racial and social injustice and their role in correcting it.

- Lead staff in shared readings that tackle the subject head-on and provoke reflection, such as *How to Be an Antiracist*, *Me and White Supremacy*, and *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood ... and the Rest of Y’all Too*. Connect the lessons learned to culturally responsive teaching practices and the authenticity of tasks and tests assigned to students.
- Adapt classroom readings and discussions to the moment. When Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, one Chicago-area teacher read *I Dissent* to the class, sparking a discussion about historical and contemporary prejudice and injustice.
- Share news about in-school initiatives with parents and community partners. Parents in one largely white school thanked the principal for sharing resources on talking about race with their children. ⚙️



### Key Considerations:

**Take time to pause, perhaps during breaks in the school year, and keep pace with changing and reframed definitions of SEL. CASEL’s transformative SEL framework directs SEL toward justice-oriented citizenship while remaining rooted in the five core competencies and teaching the capabilities needed to critically examine the root causes of inequity.**

**Be methodical and deliberate, but don’t expect overnight results. Understanding the complex implications of racial injustice and their effect on students demands a careful unraveling of centuries of history.**



### Reflection Questions:

- Are my staff and I applying SEL frameworks to understanding and welcoming the values that students and families of varied cultures bring to the school community?
- How can we move past old ideas of assimilation that expected immigrants and minorities to dissolve into the majority culture?



# Resources

Research commissioned by The Wallace Foundation explores whether social-emotional learning (SEL) can boost academic achievement and children's competencies. Find the growing body of resources from The Wallace Foundation at [www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/social-and-emotional-learning/pages/default.aspx](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/social-and-emotional-learning/pages/default.aspx).

## Resources providing details on the benefits of SEL and effective practices include:

*Early Lessons From Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning*. RAND Corporation. The Wallace Foundation's groundbreaking report gathers on-the-ground lessons from 38 Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative schools and co-located out-of-school-time (OST) programs that implemented SEL across four intertwined principles: Setting a positive climate, offering explicit SEL instruction to students, integrating SEL into academic instruction and OST activities, and pursuing mutually reinforcing OST partnerships.

The report offers practical early lessons on executing system-level activities to launch and coordinate SEL work across multiple sites, developing OST partnerships at the district and school levels, developing adults' capacity to promote SEL, and improving climate and delivering SEL instruction to students.

*Navigating Social and Emotional Learning From the Inside Out*. Stephanie Jones, Katharine Brush, Rebecca Bailey, Gretchen Brion-Meisels, Joseph McIntyre, Jennifer Kahn, Bryan Nelson, and Laura Stickle.

*Kernels of Practice for SEL: Low-Cost, Low-Burden Strategies*. Stephanie Jones, Jennifer Kahn, Katharine Brush, and Rebecca Bailey.

*Preparing for Effective SEL Implementation*. Stephanie Jones, Jennifer Kahn, Katharine Brush, and Rebecca Bailey.

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