

# 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

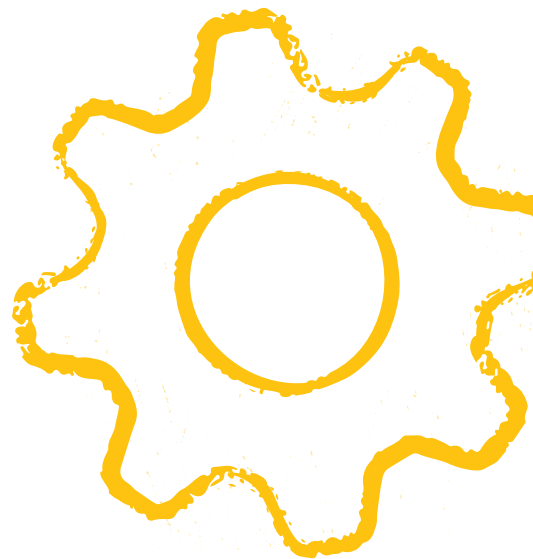
diversity of characters in their books, creating an invitation for them to strive for the SEL competencies of connecting with the lives of others and respecting differences.

- 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.





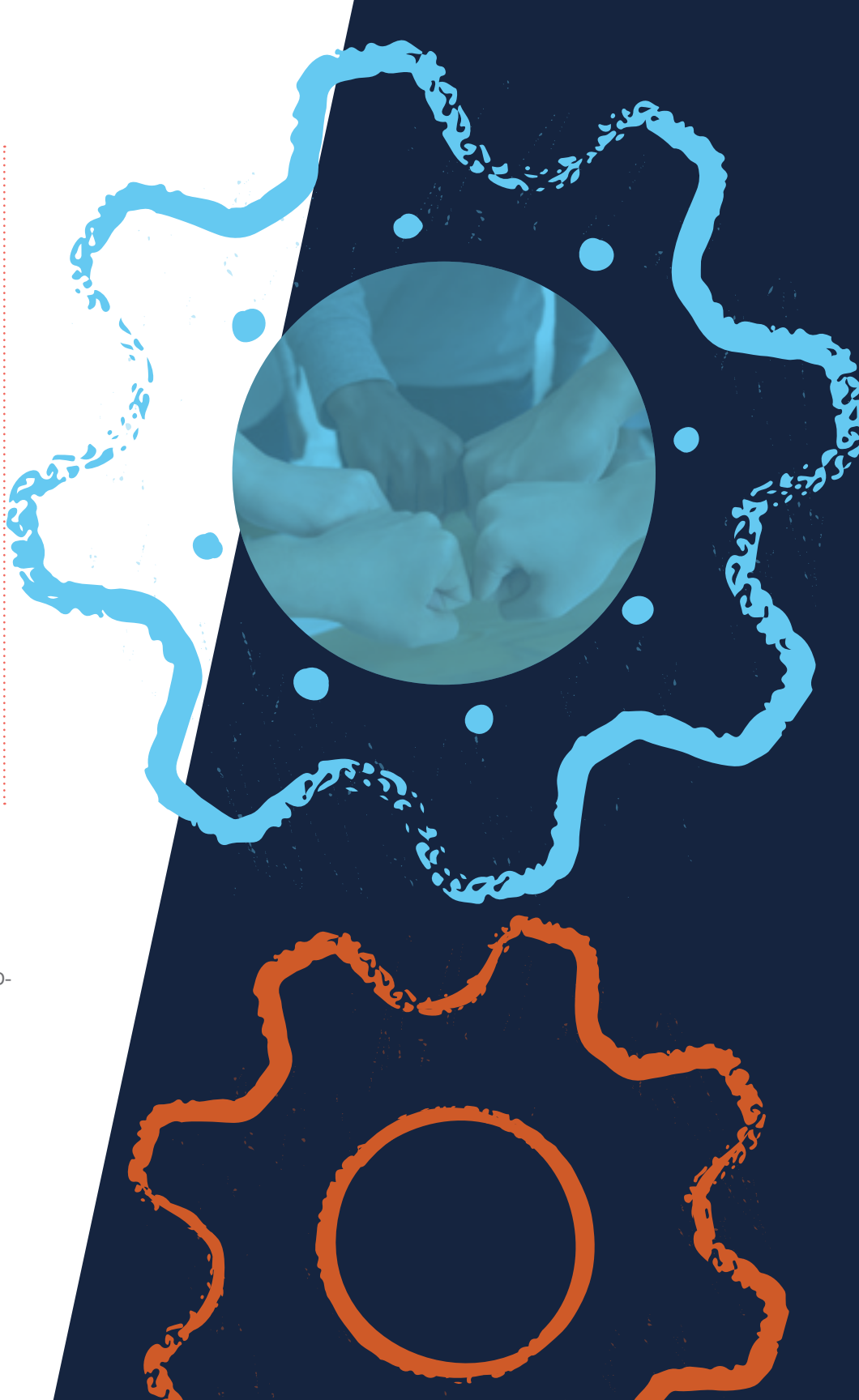
### Reflection Questions:

- 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.



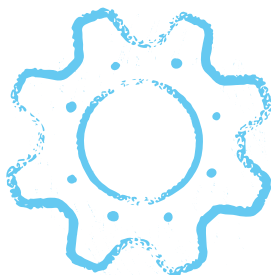
### Reflection Questions:

- 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?