

# COOKING UP

# Adults' Capacity for SEL

A six-step recipe for success | By M. Diane McCormick

Looking for a tasty way to spice up SEL in your school? Stir in some adult SEL! The plateful of four essential approaches for delivering SEL—set a positive climate, offer explicit SEL instruction, integrate SEL into academic instruction and out-of-school-time (OST) activities, and build school-OST partnerships—isn't part of a balanced diet unless your teachers and instructors are steeped in their own emotional competence.

The six key steps of adult SEL and their serving suggestions emerged from the test-kitchen elementary schools and out-of-school programs participating in The Wallace Foundation's Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI). When adults understand the whys and hows of SEL, you have a recipe for SEL success that cooks up perfectly every time.



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## STEP 1

### Measure Adult SEL

Teachers and OST instructors agreed on the importance of baking in their own SEL skills before they could promote the social, emotional, and academic learning of their students.

Key ingredients in adult SEL competence include empowering teachers' decision-making, making consistent time for SEL instruction, modeling SEL at the administrator level, detailing what staff needs to feel safe and supported, and applying SEL practices for welcoming, optimistic staff meetings.

## STEP 2

### Sprinkle in Hands-on Practice

Teachers know that hands-on learning works best for children, and it's most effective for adults, too. In fact, PSELI teachers and OST staff agreed that hands-on training would help them better digest SEL lessons for immediate use with students. The vast majority asked for a sauté of professional development in SEL instruction to help differentiate learning and meet the needs of students with disabilities or cultural and linguistic differences.

## STEP 3

### Spice Up the PD Schedule

Turnover might wreak havoc on carefully designed PD schedules in which each session builds upon the previous one. OST programs, especially, often conduct repeat sessions for new staffers who are replacing those who left.

One program tackled the problem by offering repeatable "quick bites"—30-minute early-morning SEL snacks—on topics such as problem-solving or mindfulness. Another developed an eight-course SEL Academy available twice a year, while a third focused on training OST managers who seemed likely to stay longer.

## STEP 4

### Slice and Dice Concerns

Teachers and OST staff agreed that SEL improves academics. Still, doubts linger. Many felt that other adults—parents, counselors, psychologists—should take primary responsibility for student SEL.

Persistent SEL myths range from the belief that SEL is only for students with behavioral challenges to fears that SEL eliminates consequences for misbehavior. PSELI managers dispelled these misperceptions with evidence of success from a classic cookbook: *The Casel Guide to Schoolwide SEL*.

## STEP 5

### Whisk in Centralized PD

Some PSELI communities centralized PD through a system-level staff person or consultant. Others trained the trainer, who trained their own colleagues.

Train-the-trainer communities encountered inconsistencies across sites, and trainers felt overburdened. Some communities adopted hybrids, blending centralized PD with train-the-trainer PD for site-specific needs. Centralization was especially sweet for expert PD in specific SEL curricula, such as MindUP and Second Step.

## STEP 6

### Ladle on the Coaching

Throughout PSELI communities, sous-chef coaches customized PD to the needs of line-cook teachers and instructors, but the recipe wasn't foolproof. Some coaches needed more time, while some teachers and instructors were confused about the role of coaches.

PSELI communities refined the formula by catering to the needs of frontline staff. They equipped coaches to explicitly model SEL lessons, help teachers adapt lessons for students with disabilities, and provide specific feedback.

# Now Serve It Up Right



To download a copy of “Early Lessons From Schools and Out-of-School-Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning,” visit The Wallace Foundation at [bit.ly/3qdR6zZ](https://bit.ly/3qdR6zZ).

## Serving suggestions:

- Be explicit about building adult SEL skills into SEL professional development.
- Consider how improving the school climate should incorporate the social and emotional well-being of adults as well as students.

## Serving suggestions:

- Model the skills PD participants are learning, and provide time for hands-on practice.
- Provide concrete strategies and examples for differentiating SEL curricula and practices for a diverse student body.

## Serving suggestions:

- Establish an SEL PD calendar for the entire school year with plenty of advance notice. Indicate which sessions are mandatory, and specify the topics to avoid redundancy for those who have already been trained in certain SEL subjects.
- Incorporate longer SEL instruction sessions and more frequent, shorter sessions on discrete SEL concepts into the PD schedule.

Adult SEL  
That  
Satisfies

Zesty  
Hands-on  
Practice

Nutrient-rich  
PD

Tenderized  
Concerns

Sizzling  
Centralized  
PD

Gourmet  
Coaching

## Serving suggestions:

- Communicate the belief of school and site leaders that supporting student SEL is foundational to each adult's role.
- In PD, explicitly discuss common concerns about SEL and its implications for managing student behavior.
- Use any available local data to show the positive impact of SEL on the community.

## Serving suggestions:

- Don't rely solely on train-the-trainer PD. Remove the full burden from site leaders, especially for SEL curricula in which content expertise is critical.
- Reserve train-the-trainer strategies for differentiating PD according to site needs, such as improving climate or engaging with families.
- When using train-the-trainer approaches, communicate clear expectations of site-based trainers and provide ample support.

## Serving suggestions:

- Hire coaches with prior teaching experience in school or OST programs to promote rapport with frontline staff.
- If using an SEL curriculum in school, hire coaches with SEL curriculum content knowledge.
- Connect coaches directly with frontline staff to model SEL lessons through opportunities such as observations, feedback, and grade-level teacher meetings.
- Write coaches' responsibilities in a document, and discuss them with everyone involved. ●

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