RECOMMENDED PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING STATE POLICIES AND GUIDELINES TO SUPPORT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

In our work with states, we have observed that most follow a similar process when they develop policies or guidelines to support statewide implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL), such as establishing learning goals or standards for student social and emotional competencies, or providing guidance to support implementation of SEL. Based on our extensive experience supporting state and district teams, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and American Institutes for Research (AIR) designed this tool to support teams as they work through the process of developing policies and guidance. Figure 1 on the next page offers a flow chart of the process we recommend for writing and implementing SEL policies and guidelines, which may include learning goals or standards for student social and emotional competencies.

How to Use This Document

This document is designed to help guide the process of developing, implementing, and sustaining SEL policies and practices by state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) that want to implement SEL policies and guidelines. The document identifies steps to complete the process and should be used in combination with more content-driven documents (see sidebar). The steps found within this document are not necessarily sequential, and SEAs and LEAs may find they need to go through the process multiple times depending on the number of policies and guidelines implemented. For example, SEAs and LEAs may first decide to go through the process to develop an SEL vision, and after they create a vision, they may want to use the process to develop SEL goals or competencies.

For more information about the process of articulating learning goals for SEL, please refer to the following resources:

State Theory of Action: Systemic Social and Emotional Learning for States

Key Features of High-Quality Policies and Guidelines to Support Social and Emotional Learning

State Resource Center: Frameworks and Competencies, Standards, and Guidelines

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Identify the need. **1**

 2 Form teams of stakeholders and identify roles.

Develop a shared vision and purpose for working group meetings. **3**

 4 Draft SEL policies and guidelines.

Review, edit, and obtain working group and key stakeholder group approval. **5**

 6 Engage in the review process.

Develop and finalize dissemination, marketing, and adoption plans. **7**

 8 Formally adopt and disseminate.

Pilot new policies and guidelines. **9**

 10 Reveiw documents on a regular basis.

Figure 1. Steps to Writing SEL Policies or Guidelines

1   Identify the need.

Prior to developing SEL policies and guidelines, it is important to have a clear understanding of the need for SEL in your state or district. Consider the following questions:

• Why is it important for students to have social and emotional competence—now (in school) and in the future (in the world of work)?
• In addition to academic skills, what social and emotional skills and future ready skills will students need to be successful, now and in the future?
• How can SEL build upon the work that we are already doing?
• Why is SEL important for multiple stakeholders, including educators and employers?

By answering these key questions at the outset, states and districts can better develop a plan for their SEL efforts and create buy-in and engagement from stakeholders and key leaders. A wide range of information can be used to inform this step, from informal (e.g., opinions of working group members) to formal (landscape analyses, surveys, etc.)

2   Form teams of stakeholders and identify roles.

The number of stakeholders who are involved in the development of SEL policies and guidelines may vary. Most teams begin by forming two groups: an active ***working group*** and a broader group of ***key stakeholders***. We describe each group below:

Working group. The working group is responsible for the development of policies and guidelines and is usually composed of key leaders. Ideally, the working group will include individuals who have experience developing policies or guidelines in the past, as well as expertise in SEL. Working group teams range in size from three to ten team members, depending on the needs of the group and who the key leaders think needs to be involved. Team members should reflect the race, ethnicity, and culture of the state and should include representatives from multiple offices, which could include instruction, student supports, academic standards, school improvement, school safety, early learning, afterschool, educator effectiveness, career and workforce development, counseling, mental health, and special education.

Districts or schools with experience implementing SEL will benefit from involving teachers, administrators, social workers, or counselors in the working group. Individuals who bring experience implementing SEL (from districts or schools) can be an important addition.

If possible, also involve someone from early learning (at the state level)—ideally someone who is familiar with or was involved in developing SEL learning goals, competencies, or standards at the preschool level. Preschool guidance documents are likely to have come from the perspective of the "whole child" and often have many of the features of high-quality policies and guidelines for SEL. Individuals who helped develop preschool SEL guidance and competencies can be especially helpful when developing SEL policies or guidelines for the K–12 level. They can also help build developmental continuity.

The process for developing SEL policies and guidelines generally takes six months to one year or more, depending on the amount of time teams can invest and the degree to which the team draws from existing resources from other states and districts. In our experience, working groups usually meet regularly (either bimonthly or monthly). In addition, the working group actively cultivates relationships with key stakeholders (described below), keeps them informed, and gathers their ideas throughout the process—especially in planning for dissemination and promotion of the new policies or guidelines (including learning goals for SEL).

In addition to identifying and building relationships with the working group members, the group may identify an external expert on SEL or child development to help with the process of developing policies or guidelines (including learning goals or competencies for SEL). Consider options such as contracting with a consultant and/or partnering with technical assistance centers like the regional educational laboratories and comprehensive centers.

Key stakeholders. When identifying which key stakeholders to include, there are several questions to think about: Who are the people who can help make dissemination and adoption of the policies or guidelines a success? Who will be important for promoting and championing the new policies or guidelines? Who in leadership positions needs to be cultivated to avoid possible resistance later? Key stakeholders may include representatives from a large number (up to 30 or more) of offices within the department of education and outside organizations (e.g., advocacy groups for SEL, teacher education, school boards, governor's office, legislative officials, principal and teacher organizations and unions, public health offices and departments, children and familie services, mental health, workforce development boards, and afterschool). Involve stakeholders who can be helpful in supporting and promoting the work at appropriate times, including review or adoption of policies or guidelines.

Key stakeholders generally meet less often than the working group (e.g., they may meet at the beginning and toward the end of the process, and/or quarterly), but are kept informed and consulted as the work progresses. It is particularly important to consult the key stakeholders in planning the development of policies or guidance, as well as the outreach and communications when the policies or guidance will be released. Key stakeholders are extremely helpful in dissemination and ideally will be actively involved with the working group in the development of a communications plan to release and promote the new policies or guidelines.

Throughout the design and development process, it is also important to cultivate the support and endorsement of leaders (e.g., state chief state school officers, district superintendents, and principals) by sharing updates and keeping them informed of and excited about your process.

3 👁 Develop a shared vision and purpose for working group meetings.

Effective teams have clarity about their purpose and activities, and they follow a logical sequence for meetings. The goal of the first few meetings is often to create a shared vision and organize the group for the work ahead. This process generally includes getting to know one another; developing a common definition of SEL; determining an SEL framework that will be used; identifying other policies, standards, or guidelines that may include SEL (e.g., preschool standards, health and physical education standards, career and technical education standards); reviewing research on SEL; brainstorming and identifying working group goals; and developing the format for policies or guidelines. The CASEL Collaborating States Initiative (CSI) can be helpful in all these decisions. We invite your team to connect with us as you move through this process. Some of the immediate decisions to be made include the following:

a. **What is our goal?** What is our desired result or what outcomes do we want students to achieve? What is our specific plan to achieve our goals? Do we want to develop policies or guidelines? As part of the work, do we want to articulate goals for student social and emotional competencies?

Every state or district is different, and the needs and goals of each are unique. The team needs to develop goals that are most relevant and meaningful for their state or district. Once those goals have been identified, the Collaborating States Initiative (CSI) may be helpful in identifying experts and/or resources that may support the work toward those particular goals and identify indicators to measure student progress.

b. **What does the research tell us?** What are the benefits of SEL?

c. **What is our shared definition of SEL?** What frameworks could we use or does the state already use (e.g., CASEL framework, Development Framework for the Integration of SEL and Career and Workforce Development)? What other priorities should we connect to (e.g., MTSS, mental health, SEL, career and workforce development).

d. **What examples are we going to look at from other states?** (See examples in Key Features of High-Quality Policies and Guidelines to Support SEL, K-12 SEL Learning Competencies and Standards in 18 States).

e. **What is the format we will use?** What will be the grade bands? Will adult competencies be added? As much as possible, we recommend using formats widely used in your state or districts that educators find familiar. If you are developing learning goals or competencies, for example, then use the same format as those for academic standards.

f. **What additional resources will we use to help us develop SEL policies or guidelines** (Developmental Framework for the Integration of SEL and Career and Workforce Development, Transformative SEL)?

g. What process will we use to develop the SEL policies or guidelines? How will we draft the policies or guidelines? Will we write the policies or guidelines as a working group, or will one person write them, to be reviewed by all? What will be the timeline? Are there sources of data from our state that would be helpful in this process?

h. Are the policies or guidelines we develop going to be voluntary or mandatory? If we want them to be voluntary, what language and wording will we use to avoid making them seem like requirements? Whatever we decide, what is the ultimate process (described in Step 8) that we will need to follow for obtaining approval from the state, school board, or department?

i. What is our plan for communications about the policies or guidelines? How will we gather and share information? Who are our key audiences (e.g., teachers), and how and when will we engage them? Who can help us engage key professional audiences and other audiences (e.g., parent-teacher-student associations) to share drafts of our work for review? When should we plan to share information?
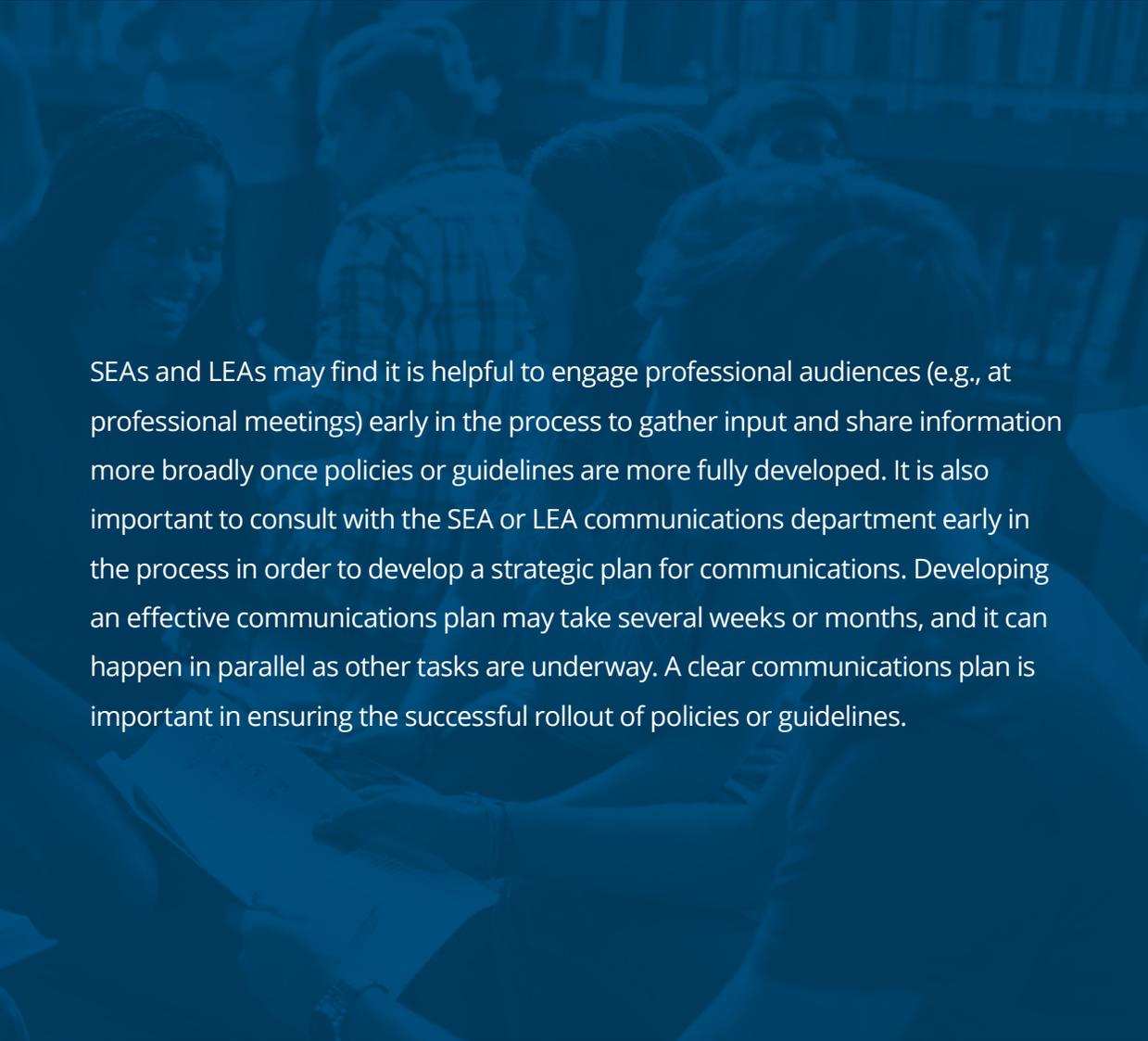
SEAs and LEAs may find it is helpful to engage professional audiences (e.g., at professional meetings) early in the process to gather input and share information more broadly once policies or guidelines are more fully developed. It is also important to consult with the SEA or LEA communications department early in the process in order to develop a strategic plan for communications. Developing an effective communications plan may take several weeks or months, and it can happen in parallel as other tasks are underway. A clear communications plan is important in ensuring the successful rollout of policies or guidelines.

4 Draft SEL policies or guidelines.

Once clear goals and a group process are established, the working group drafts the policies or guidelines. We have generally observed that working groups follow two approaches for this. In the first approach, working groups identify one or more examples of policies or guidelines from other states or districts that meet most of the group's goals. The CASEL CSI team can be helpful in identifying relevant, high quality examples from other states. In this case, the challenge of the working group might be to make modifications or fill gaps for their state or district.

In the second approach, the working group may not find a set of policies or guidelines that meets their needs. In this case, the working group writes its own policies or guidelines, or chooses from other examples. This approach requires much more work and a bit more risk. It is important that policies or guidelines reflect best practices and research, and it takes work to ensure that new tools are evidence-based. Starting with existing tools can simplify the process.

CASEL recommends the first approach, in which the working group identifies relevant, high-quality state or district examples of SEL policies or guidelines (if possible), to be modified as necessary. Once the working group establishes the process and the examples they will use, they can break up the work into manageable sections or topics over time.

5 Review, edit, and obtain working group and key stakeholder group approval.

Once a draft of the policies or guidelines is completed, have the draft edited by a lead writer who can make sure the policies or guidelines read in a consistent voice. In addition, at least two to three national experts, including the expert identified in Step 2, can review the policies or guidelines to ensure the document(s) reflects the most current research in the field. The CASEL CSI team can be helpful in the review process as well.

After the working group conducts this review and feedback is received from experts, a draft of the policies or guidelines should be completed. When completed, allow the key stakeholders, as well as a broader group of stakeholders, to comment. After the working group reviews stakeholder comments to identify important issues and themes, decide what needs to be addressed and how. The lead writer could make the necessary revisions and have the working group approve the final draft.

6 Engage in the review process.

Every state or district has its own process for approving policies or guidelines before adoption. It is important to learn about and understand the process throughout to be sure that the work makes sense given these procedures. Ensure that the process for review is clear, including how to collect feedback from multiple stakeholders, and how to use feedback to revise and edit the SEL policies and guidelines. Teams often find it necessary to revise the new policies or guidelines using feedback received during the state review process to prepare fully for the official release.

7 Develop and finalize dissemination, marketing, and adoption plans.

Throughout the process and continuing during the state review process, the working team should consult with the larger group of key stakeholders (individually or as a group) and the communications team to develop a plan for disseminating, promoting, and adopting the new policies or guidelines once they are approved. These plans should also include ways to encourage adoption of the policies or guidelines, including ways to engage and support local implementers and other stakeholders.

8 Formally adopt and disseminate.

Activate the key stakeholders and execute the dissemination plan. Begin working on and supporting development of new tools or resources (e.g., professional development) that may be helpful to support the new policies or guidelines. The adoption and dissemination process will vary depending on the policies and guidelines developed, as well as the role of the SEA or LEA in working with districts and schools.

9 Pilot new policies or guidelines.

Another important activity to consider after the approval process is to pilot the new policies or guidelines. If possible, do so in districts or schools that are already implementing SEL to identify additional support that may be necessary to ensure the new policies or guidelines will be successful. Conduct focus groups in districts and schools working with the policies or guidelines to gather information. For example, the working group may identify or already be thinking about additional tools, resources, or strategies that may need to be developed to support the new policies or guidelines (including, for example, training and professional development).

10 Review documents on a regular basis.

Education is a multifaceted field subject to periodic change. It is important to review the policies and guidelines on a regular basis, particularly after implementation has occurred and feedback is received from those districts and schools that are actively using the SEL policies and guidelines. We have observed states develop a variety of methods and systems for gathering information and feedback (e.g., focus groups, surveys, evaluation forms, and Google analytics.)

CONCLUSION

States help encourage high quality SEL when they develop a comprehensive set of policies, guidance, and frameworks to support SEL. For more information (including examples from other states) see the CASEL Collaborating States Initiatives, State Theory of Action, State Resource Center, and the SEL State Scorecard Scan.

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