

A Data-Informed Approach to Social-Emotional Learning

Policy Recommendations for State and Local Leaders

A Policy Brief By
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About Transforming Education

Transforming Education (TransformEd) advances research, policy, and practice to support students in developing the social-emotional competencies they need to succeed in college, career, and life. TransformEd has coined the term “MESH” (Mindsets, Essential Skills, and Habits) to encompass the subset of social-emotional skills that research has linked most clearly to student success and that are, therefore, of the most immediate importance to educators and education policymakers.

TransformEd’s work is grounded in compelling, longitudinal research on the importance of MESH competencies and informed by our on-the-ground experience as:

- **The lead strategic advisor to the CORE Districts:** Six school districts (serving over one million students) that have chosen to integrate MESH competencies alongside academic outcomes in their federally approved accountability and continuous improvement system;
- **The facilitator of the Boston Charter Research Collaborative:** A collaboration between six high-performing charter management organizations and researchers at Harvard and MIT to develop and pilot innovative ways to assess and develop students’ cognitive and MESH skill; and
- **Partner to NewSchools Venture Fund:** A multi-year collaboration to support a growing portfolio of new district and charter schools in expanding their definition of student success. Together, we prioritize and design metrics for a shared set of competencies, address pressing questions about how to track student progress, make meaning from this data, and use it to improve student outcomes.

Through our relationships with researchers, policymakers, and education system leaders, TransformEd is uniquely positioned to translate lessons learned from our on-the-ground research and practice work into changes in education policy and systemic practices that will help ensure that all students have opportunities to build the MESH skills they need to succeed in school and beyond.

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The demand for advancing social-emotional learning (SEL) in U.S. schools is strong and growing. But while findings signal significant support and enthusiasm for SEL, most school systems have not yet adopted a set of policies that prioritize the development and assessment of social-emotional competencies (SEC), inform district-wide decision making about SEL, and coordinate the implementation of evidence-based SEL practices. Without such policies in place, schools are currently missing an opportunity to serve all of our students more effectively.

At TransformEd, we believe that when educators have data related to SEL, they are better equipped to support the development of competencies that help all students succeed in school and in life. A data-informed approach to SEL is crucial to educating today's students because it informs the system-wide integration of SEL into school culture and practice, and it helps educators invest in strategies that work for all students. This paper lays out a series of policy recommendations for both state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) that support a locally-created, systematic, and data-informed approach to SEL. Each recommendation is accompanied by a concrete example of the recommendation in action.

WHAT IS SEL?

In this paper, SEL refers to the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal mindsets and competencies (social-emotional competencies, or “SEC”) that have been shown to be meaningful (i.e., that are predictive of important student academic and behavioral outcomes), measurable (i.e., that can be assessed with valid and reliable measures that are feasible to administer at scale in schools), and malleable (i.e., that can be developed in a variety of school settings). Examples of SEC include self-management, growth mindset, and social awareness.

Gather Input on Learning Environments

- **Engage an array of stakeholders:** SEAs and LEAs should gather input on SEL from students, families, educators, labor unions, and researchers to establish a common understanding of the need for SEL and identify specific competencies to prioritize.
- **Pilot culture and climate surveys:** Culture and climate surveys allow students to share the extent to which they feel connected to and safe within a school community. Such surveys can provide important information about aspects of a learning environment that support SEL.
- **Consider integrating SEL data collection into school-level needs assessments:** SEAs and LEAs can design school-level needs assessments to identify areas in which students are thriving or need more support for their social-emotional development.

Begin Measuring Social-Emotional Competencies (SEC)

- **Pilot SEC measures:** SEAs should leverage the flexibility of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to collect data with a network of LEAs that seek to support SEL. The network can prioritize a set of competencies, identify a common set of measures, use data to invest in evidence-based practices, and share their lessons learned with other LEAs.
- **Seek opportunities to tailor other assessments to include SEC measures:** By tailoring culture and climate surveys or other innovative assessments to include SEC measures, SEAs or LEAs can access a range of data related to students' skills and mindsets as well as their learning environments.

Use Data to Build Local Capacity & Inform Practice

- **Fund data-informed SEL initiatives:** SEAs should leverage existing funding streams, namely Title IV grants within ESSA, to support SEL-related programs, data gathering, and analysis at the local level. SEAs and LEAs should also explore other sources of funding, both through their existing budget and other partnerships, to support this work.
- **Support professional learning opportunities on SEL and the use of SEL-related data:** Educators deserve actionable information on how to analyze data through a lens of equity and use those data to inform instructional decisions. Schools and LEAs should offer professional learning sessions with SEL coaches, experts, and/or researchers who will work alongside teachers to help interpret data, ensure student privacy, and provide guidance on practical next steps.
- **Provide actionable guidance to LEAs to catalyze local approaches to SEL:** SEAs can offer practical guidance on SEL by providing implementation guidelines on evidence-based approaches to support and assess students' social-emotional development. Developing a "graduate profile" can also provide LEAs with a clearer picture of skills and mindsets that all schools should be helping students develop.
- **Engage students in data conversations:** SEAs and LEAs can complement the information they receive from SEC assessments with direct input and reflections on group-level data from the students taking the assessments.

Guiding Principles

A data-informed approach to SEL empowers educators to make better decisions in serving the whole child. This approach accelerates our progress as a field, fosters safe and supportive learning environments, and ultimately helps young people develop the skills they need to thrive as flourishing individuals and to contribute to society. As such, we embrace the following principles to guide our recommendations:

Use research to integrate SEL into practice

Simply put, we must measure what matters—and robust research consistently shows that SEL matters for all students.¹ Educators can draw on this research to identify competencies that are measurable, malleable, and meaningful to student success—and support students' development of those competencies. A data-informed approach to SEL can help educators select research-based SEL practices for integration into curriculum and pedagogy.

Advance equity

SEL can work to affirm student identity and celebrate student strengths; it can also support students who have undergone traumatic or adverse experiences.² Measurement of students' SEC must be valid and reliable for all subgroups, and the resulting data should be used to identify students' assets as well as the systemic barriers to success. Measuring SEC and conducting culture and climate surveys help educators better understand students' sense of belonging and safety within a school community, provide more targeted support for students, and explore whether existing SEL-related practices are working well for all students. Emphasizing SEL may also help to create experiences that reduce biases held by educators and increase social connectedness among students.³

Improve continuously

Research indicates that adults can help students adopt learning mindsets, increasing their motivation to try challenging tasks and to achieve at higher levels.⁴ TransformEd seeks to support learning environments that cultivate these mindsets, foster collaboration, and encourage continuous

improvement among both students and adults. To that end, we support the use of formative assessments that allow educators to gather data frequently to better understand whether their practices are working well for all students and to inform future practices.

Leverage policy flexibility

ESSA shifts considerable authority to states and local districts, ensuring that they have increased flexibility to innovate as they seek to prepare students for college and career success. ESSA empowers states to make more of the critical decisions related to accountability, school improvement, education spending, and public reporting. Its emphasis on employing evidence-based practices should encourage SEAs and LEAs to use this new authority to adopt more data-informed approaches and expand the definition of student success.

Invest in what works

TransformEd believes that SEL should be integrated within schools, and to do that effectively, SEAs and LEAs need to invest in the practices that support students' social-emotional development. Through [a recent study conducted by TransformEd](#), we learned that K-12 public school systems spend approximately \$640 million each year on specific programming and practices to build students' SEC. In addition to those direct costs, teachers report that they spend about 8% of their time on this, which translates to an additional \$30 billion investment per year in developing students' SEC. While these investments may be paying off, implementing SEC measures and analyzing the resulting data can help us to understand exactly which approaches are working, where to allocate resources, and how best to target interventions to students.

Policy Recommendations

Classrooms and schools across the country have been practicing SEL for years, but most LEAs and SEAs have not established a set of policies to inform district-wide plans and coordinate the implementation of [evidence-based practices](#). We recommend the following policies as ways to advance a systematic, data-informed approach to SEL. We provide concrete examples of these policies within states and school systems to demonstrate what each one would look like in practice and to highlight some of the important work already underway.

I. Gather Input on Learning Environments

Recent survey results have revealed popular support for SEL: a national survey of teachers in 2013 confirmed that the vast majority (93%) of teachers believe that these skills are important; 95% believe they are teachable; and 88% of teachers report that their school already has some form of SEL programming underway.⁵ More recently, according to the [2017 PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools](#), 84% of Americans believe that schools should assess students on such skills as cooperation, respect for others, and problem solving. SEAs and LEAs should continue to solicit input and feedback on SEL because it enables education leaders to understand local stakeholder interests and thus create data systems and SEL approaches that reflect the community's beliefs, values, and needs.



Engage an array of stakeholders: States should gather input on SEL from students, families, educators, labor unions, and researchers to establish a common understanding of the need for SEL and identify specific competencies to prioritize.⁶ Working groups, stakeholder meetings, and partnerships between SEAs and LEAs can guide system-wide efforts to define problems of practice, gather data, and inform plans for implementing SEL-related initiatives. Additionally, feedback from educators can surface requests for SEL-related professional learning and support. States that have already conducted stakeholder meetings have found strong interest in SEL and SEL assessment: multiple ESSA plans that were submitted to U.S. Department of Education (USED) included an exploration of SEL data collection while acknowledging that SEL measures are not ready for use in an accountability system.⁷



Example

In designing its ESSA state plan, the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) conducted community meetings to learn more about which evidence-based interventions were needed in schools. A common theme that emerged was the desire to support social-emotional development and learn more about SEL-related measures.⁸ As a result, DDOE is identifying strategies and resources to support this work.



State Recommendation



Local Recommendation



Conduct Culture and Climate Surveys: Culture and climate surveys allow students to share the extent to which they feel connected to and safe within the school community—and research shows that these aspects of a learning environment can help foster healthy social-emotional development.⁹ Surveying school culture and climate elevates student voice, helps to identify environmental factors that can support SEL, and provides important context for interpreting data on students' SEC.



Example NewSchools Venture Fund invests in teams of educators who are designing innovative schools across the country that embrace an expanded definition of student success. To that end, some of the schools in their cohort are exploring the impact of various student competencies on academic achievement. By administering culture and climate surveys, students can voice how they feel about school and provide feedback on their overall learning experiences. One school in the cohort analyzed the data and uncovered that students did not feel strongly connected to teachers in the building. As a result, educators spent weeks engaging in a variety of intentional practices to cultivate more meaningful, supportive relationships with their students.



Consider integrating SEL data collection into needs assessments: All schools can benefit from periodic review of programs, practices, and resources to ensure that they are fully meeting student needs. In particular, SEAs and LEAs can design school-level needs assessments to help identify the areas in which students are thriving or in need of more social-emotional support. Needs assessments that include faculty and staff survey data can provide school leaders with valuable information about the degree to which educators feel SEL-related practices are working for all students.¹⁰



Example The Oregon Department of Education aims to improve support for schools through the use of one streamlined Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA).¹¹ The CNA process will include a review of “Academic, Social and Emotional Supports” and will engage districts in a local review of both quantitative and qualitative (e.g., survey) data. Also, the Vermont Agency of Education conducts Education Quality Reviews to better understand the implementation of state standards, identify best practices, and support the continuous improvement of its schools.¹² These reviews help LEAs understand how a range of factors—including the social-emotional health of its students, personalized learning, and curriculum coordination—affects school success.¹³

II. Begin Measuring Social-Emotional Competencies (SEC)

The state of SEC measurement is new and constantly evolving, but the field is already building upon encouraging information about the validity and reliability of several existing SEC measures. Student self-report surveys, which ask students to reflect on and assess their own SEC, have been piloted and scaled in schools, most notably as part of the CORE Districts' data system in California.¹⁴ While ongoing research is needed to better understand issues of potential bias in self-reporting, recent analysis by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) on CORE's first full year of implementation (2014–2015) showed that the CORE Districts' survey-based SEL measures demonstrated promising evidence of validity and reliability for the purpose of informing school improvement efforts.¹⁵ Performance- or game-based measures, which require students to demonstrate a particular skill in the classroom or in a virtual environment, also show promise. Though they have not yet been deployed at the same scale as survey-based measures, performance-based measures may mitigate some concerns about the validity of self-report surveys. Performance-based assessments do not rely on subjective interpretations by teachers or students, and they may be more effective than surveys at tracking small changes in behavior over time.¹⁶

While we do believe that the evidence is strong enough to support using SEC measures to drive continuous improvement, TransformEd does not recommend that these measures become a part of formal accountability frameworks. Research does not yet address how survey-based SEC measures would perform in a “high-stakes” accountability setting, especially as they relate to the potential for gaming, reference bias, and social desirability bias, which could undermine the information provided by the measures.¹⁷ And, while the CORE Districts' measures were found to be valid and reliable across subgroups, it is imperative that any SEC assessment continue to demonstrate validity and reliability for all students. Relatedly, we are a leading member of the [Assessment Work Group \(AWG\)](#) that seeks to advance our collective knowledge about these issues. The AWG plans to release a guide in Summer 2018 that will provide details on current SEC measures and information about appropriate SEC data use. [TransformEd's website](#) also has more details and resources on SEC assessments.



Pilot SEC measures with a network of LEAs: SEAs should leverage the flexibility of ESSA to collect data with a network of LEAs. The network can prioritize specific competencies, identify a common set of measures, use the resulting data to coordinate evidence-based practices, and share what they're learning with others. Gathering data on students' social-emotional development can facilitate conversations about whether all subgroups have equal access to SEL supports and inform investments in SEL practices.¹⁸ It can also help educators identify and understand the relationship between SEC and other student outcomes (such as chronic absenteeism and academic performance). A voluntary network facilitated by the SEA will allow LEAs to opt into a data-informed approach to SEL while also leveraging the SEA's capacity to convene critical stakeholders, provide a statewide perspective on data use, and scale promising practices.¹⁹



Example

The CORE Districts have taken a unique approach to incorporating SEL into local school systems by measuring students' SEC through student self-reports and teacher reports. Participating districts have established a collaborative to share with each other data and lessons learned, and to better understand their strengths and challenges.²⁰ In Massachusetts, five statewide associations—in conjunction with TransformEd and the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy—have launched the [exSEL Network](#). The nine participating districts plan to use SEC measures to inform practice and improve outcomes for students. This network empowers districts to work together to conduct needs assessments around SEL, pilot survey-based SEC measures, test various instructional changes, and share what they learn with each other.²¹



Seek opportunities to tailor existing assessments to include SEC measures: Many states collect a variety of data through health surveys, student engagement surveys, or culture and climate surveys. By tailoring these “student voice” surveys to include SEC measures, SEAs and LEAs can access multiple sets of complementary data and analyze how students' SEC relate to their learning environments. Moreover, including SEC measures in existing assessments can more efficiently gather data on key student competencies and perceptions through a single process, rather than issue multiple, potentially burdensome, assessments.



Example

At least nine states, as indicated in their ESSA plans, intend to administer statewide school culture and climate surveys.²² North Dakota, for example, is implementing a Student Engagement Survey to gather actionable data for school improvement.²³ While not specifically focused on gathering data on students' SEC, North Dakota's statewide survey is part of an assessment infrastructure that creates opportunities to incorporate a variety of items, including SEC items, in the future. Also, the [Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment \(MCIEA\)](#) has partnered with six public school districts and their local teacher unions to create a new vision for assessing student learning and school quality. Offering an alternative to standardized tests, MCIEA is building teacher capacity around curriculum-embedded performance assessments. The consortium couples this work with holistic school quality measures, administered through field-tested surveys and organized into five major categories: Teachers and Leadership; School Culture; Resources; Academic Learning; and Citizenship & Wellbeing.²⁴ MCIEA plans to advocate for statewide adoption of its measurement framework, which includes culture and climate and SEL-related items.

III. Use Data to Build Local Capacity & Inform Practice

A data-informed approach to SEL should include the supports for using those data effectively. To that end, SEAs and LEAs should invest in building educators' capacity to collect SEL-related data, unpack those data, and use evidence-based practices to address any growth areas that emerge. While ESSA does not specifically address SEL, it does authorize funding to support school improvement efforts, effective instruction, "well-rounded" education initiatives, and healthy and safe school conditions. These funding streams can be leveraged to help educators better understand how to interpret SEC data in ways that build upon students' assets, identify areas in which students need additional support, and implement evidence-based practices more systematically. Additionally, SEAs can support local decision making by disseminating information about SEL research and grant opportunities, coordinating a network of districts (as described on pg. 8), and serving as guardians of quality resources and tools that complement assessment and practices. At the local level, student and family voices should fuel decisions about how best to use SEC data.



Fund data-informed SEL initiatives: States should make use of existing funding streams, namely the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants within Title IV of ESSA, to initiate and sustain data-informed SEL approaches. These grants can be broadly used to address a host of educational activities that support student health, safety, and a well-rounded education.²⁵ While funding for Title IV was low in 2017-2018 school year – the grant program only received \$400 million, about a quarter of the funding the law authorized – Congress voted to nearly triple that funding in the fiscal 2018 spending bill.²⁶ SEAs should also explore distributing other state funds to LEAs through grants and partnerships, while LEAs should seek to add funding to these initiatives through their budgets, to the extent they can.

Example

LEAs will be able to use Title IV funds to support a variety of SEL initiatives.²⁷ The Title IV-A Coalition, which includes such organizations as Committee for Children and the National School Board Association, stated in a press release that the \$1.1 billion appropriated in 2018 "will allow school districts to have true flexibility in determining how to meaningfully invest in and support programs that support safe and healthy students, a well-rounded academic curriculum, and an effective educational technology program."²⁸



Support professional learning opportunities on SEL and the use of SEL data: Teacher focus groups have revealed demand for professional learning on social-emotional development.²⁹ In addition to learning about SEL more broadly, it is important that educators also know how to analyze SEC data through a lens of equity and then use those data to inform instructional decisions. In particular, schools and education systems should provide ongoing professional learning sessions with SEL coaches, experts, and/or researchers who will work alongside teachers to help interpret findings and provide guidance on practical next steps. Professional learning should also work to ensure that student privacy is safeguarded in the course of data analysis.³⁰ ESSA provides funding opportunities for educators to engage in SEL-related professional learning through Title I (for school support and improvement purposes), Title II (for supporting effective educator instruction), and Title IV (for “well-rounded” educational programming).³¹

Example

TransformEd is currently working with Harrisonburg (VA) City Public Schools on a three-year partnership to support the implementation of a data-informed approach to SEL. The district is administering surveys on school culture and climate and students’ SEC in order to design a comprehensive plan for system-wide SEL practices and to assess progress in years ahead. TransformEd will hold “Data Inquiry & Action” sessions to support educators in interpreting SEC data, spotlighting trends, and identifying actionable next steps to support students’ social-emotional development.



Provide actionable guidance to LEAs to help catalyze locally-inspired approaches to SEL: States can offer practical guidance on SEL by creating informative implementation guidelines. SEAs should underscore the value of using SEC data for continuous improvement purposes and ensure that districts are aware of opportunities to access tools, grants, and partnerships that could further their work on SEL. In conjunction with a variety of stakeholders, SEAs can also create and disseminate graduate profiles that outline the skills and mindsets that all schools should be helping their students develop.

Example

Massachusetts has developed “[Guidelines on Implementing Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Curricula](#)” through a 2010 state law designed to help prevent bullying in schools.³² These guidelines provide focused information on using data for continuous improvement as well as advice on evidence-based curricula, school-wide implementation practices, approaches to professional development, and collaboration with families and community members.



Engage students in data conversations: LEAs can complement the data they receive from measuring SEC and culture and climate with direct input from the students participating in the assessments. When structured appropriately as part of continuous improvement efforts, focus groups that review aggregate data reports with students can provide educators with a more nuanced and more complete understanding of the results.

Example Washoe County (NV) School District has developed a survey of students' social and emotional skills, habits, and mindsets. District leaders analyze the resulting data alongside their Early Warning Indicator to help identify students who may need additional social and emotional supports in order to graduate. Washoe County SD couples this analysis with data summits held for students and educators. For example, when looking at social-emotional survey results, students communicated that they felt teachers emphasized politeness to adults over the development of self-expression and authentic self-management skills. School staff also engage in professional development on how to debrief school-level data with students and work with students on school improvement planning. Student data summits have been a success in the district, and district leaders believe they have led to greater student engagement and empowerment.³³

Conclusion

We know that SEL matters when it comes to improving a variety of school, career, and life outcomes, and we also know that SEL practices are gaining momentum in our schools. A data-informed approach to SEL can equip education leaders with information they need to prioritize and help students to develop SEC, coordinate district-wide planning of SEL, and better understand which programs are working well for all students. Under ESSA, states and local districts are further empowered to adopt such an approach with a variety of policies and practices that support the whole child. Indeed, measuring students' SEC remains new—particularly compared to measuring academic skills such as reading and math—and further research is needed to ascertain which assessments work best in different educational situations. But if we know that social-emotional skills contribute to student success, then we must support students in developing them. As this paper has outlined, we have the policy tools available to initiate a data-informed approach to SEL in our schools. And we've never had a better time than now to translate these opportunities into action.

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Bob LaRocca is Director of Policy and Communications at TransformEd, where he is responsible for collaborating with policymakers and crafting the organization's policy and communications plan. In this capacity, Bob presents on TransformEd's work at national conferences, authors and contributes to publications on social-emotional learning (SEL) and education policy, and cultivates partnerships with federal, state, and local education leaders and organizations that are dedicated to supporting a data-informed approach to SEL. Prior to joining TransformEd, Bob was Director of Strategic Collaborations at Primary Source, where he worked with education leaders to advance global education in K-12 schools, and has also taught at multiple Boston-area schools. As an attorney, Bob helped run the Community Business Clinic at Northeastern School of Law, where he provided legal services to urban entrepreneurs and small business owners. And, he has served as a campaign manager and senior adviser on many Massachusetts political campaigns, developing policy positions and providing strategic communications advice to candidates. Bob holds an undergraduate degree from Georgetown University, a master's degree from the London School of Economics, and a law degree from Boston College Law School.

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Sara Bartolino Krachman serves as the Co-Founder & Executive Director of Transforming Education, a nonprofit that translates the latest research on social-emotional skills into actionable policies and practices that support student success. Prior to founding TransformEd, Sara was a Senior Associate within The Parthenon Group's Education Practice, where she worked with leading national foundations, large urban school districts, and state departments of education on strategic planning and implementation of systems change efforts. Before joining Parthenon, Sara served as Vice President of Operations for INeedAPencil, a provider of free online SAT preparation to low-income students. Sara earned her A.B. in Government from Harvard University, where she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.