Approaching SEL as a Whole-School Effort, Not an Add-On: Lessons from Two Charter Networks

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary

- **The problem:** There is wide recognition that supporting social-emotional learning (SEL) is a critical task for schools as they emerge from the pandemic, but implementation is challenging and SEL programs can easily turn into isolated and disjointed initiatives.

- **The cost:** When schools treat SEL as an isolated initiative, implementation can be uneven and difficult to support. Other priorities may end up crowding out attention to SEL or creating barriers to implementation and learning.

- **The solution:** Lessons from two charter management organizations with well-developed approaches to SEL suggest that when leaders think about supporting SEL, they must integrate shared approaches, data, and staffing while working to integrate SEL into their school as *an organization*. System and school leaders play a key role in framing SEL as a whole-school effort.

This paper highlights the approach that two innovative charter networks—Uplift Education and Distinctive Schools—took last year to address student well-being and social-emotional development. Above all, their examples suggest that education leaders should commit to weaving their work on SEL into the fabric of their school. They highlight the importance of leveraging shared approaches to SEL, data, and staffing to support SEL schoolwide. Consistent with long-standing advice and research on the importance of a schoolwide approach to SEL, they underscore the importance of integrating SEL into schools and systems at the organizational level.

To do this work, leaders heading into the fall must develop a comprehensive whole-school approach to SEL. Some SEL supports will require extra resources in the coming months, but others will not require a lot of time or money. In either case, leaders should ask themselves and their teams these pivotal questions:

- How does our SEL work reflect our values? How do our values reflect our SEL work?
- How are we supporting adults, as well as students?
- Where are decisions about SEL happening? Are they in places that have access to authority in the organization?
- How can we fit SEL into our existing routines and approaches? How do we elevate our understanding and analysis of SEL to be on par with how we approach academics?
- As we invest in SEL in our district or school, what will we hold tight and what will we hold loose?
- How can we make sure that our approaches are relevant for students and staff?

Introduction

Like schools across the country, Uplift Education operated remotely last school year. During its first week, Uplift, the largest charter network in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, surveyed students on their well-being, asking, "Would you like to talk privately with an adult from school about how you're feeling or something on your mind?" One in three students answered, "Yes." For Uplift, that translated to about 4,000 students raising their virtual hands to reach out for help from an adult.

"It was more than we anticipated," recalled Yasmin Bhatia, Uplift's CEO. To ensure every student who wanted to talk with an adult could, Uplift enlisted its school counselors, teachers, and leaders. It was an all-hands-on-deck outreach effort. One by one, the network contacted each student who asked to talk in the survey.

"The number one thing we heard," Bhatia said, "were issues related to family stress and stress related to COVID: 'I'm scared about getting COVID' or 'My dad lost his job.'" Students said they were struggling with school and missed their friends and teachers. And they didn't like being on the computer for hours on end. From the network's twelfth graders all the way down to its third graders, the story was similar: living and learning during the pandemic was taking a toll.

Uplift's students weren't alone. Around the same time, NBC News and Challenge Success, a nonprofit affiliated with the Stanford Graduate School of Education, surveyed 10,000 high school students in schools participating in the Challenge Success/Stanford Survey of Adolescent School Experiences. A majority of the students (56 percent) told Challenge Success they were more stressed about school than they were before the pandemic. And nearly a third (32 percent) said their mental health was a major source of stress (compared to 26 percent before the pandemic).[1]

"At first this was just a break from school," a tenth grader told Challenge Success, "but now all I feel is stress, anxiety, and pain."[2]

Looking ahead to this fall, the toll from last year and ongoing concerns about the pandemic mean that concerns about students' social-emotional well-being and development are unlikely to disappear any time soon. The good news is that there's no shortage of ideas and programs for how school systems can support social-emotional well-being and learning for students as they head into the new school year. Over the last year, guidance on social-emotional learning (SEL) has responded to the pandemic and heightened calls for racial equity. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL),

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1 Also see Lisa Chu and Robin Lake, *The kids are (really) not alright: A synthesis of COVID-19 student surveys* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2021).
2 *Kids Under Pressure: A Look at Student Well-Being and Engagement During the Pandemic* (Challenge Success and NBC News, 2021). Feelings of stress, anxiety, and pain last year weren't only about the pandemic and remote learning. Students and teachers nationwide also experienced the nation's reckoning with police violence against Black people and mobilization for racial justice. They watched threats to our democracy on television and social media. And for some, the ongoing economic crisis created housing and food insecurity. The result was a pressure cooker unlike anything many students and adults had experienced before.

for example, revised its definition of SEL to speak more directly to race, identity, and equity. And there's a renewed interest in the field about the well-being of adults in schools and the importance of out-of-school contexts.

These guideposts are important. But as with any change in education, translating them into action will be challenging. Prior research highlights how successful SEL implementation depends on school- and system-level conditions often lacking in school systems (e.g., having a clear definition and vision of goals, dedicating time and staff to the work, and establishing effective channels of communication).

Education leaders must commit to weaving their work on SEL into the fabric of their school.

With that in mind, this paper highlights the approach that Uplift and another innovative charter network, Distinctive Schools, took last year to address student well-being and social-emotional development.

Above all, their example suggests that education leaders must commit to weaving their work on SEL into the fabric of their school. They highlight the importance of leveraging shared approaches to SEL, data, and staffing to support SEL schoolwide. Consistent with long-standing advice and research on the importance of a schoolwide approach to SEL, they underscore the importance of integrating SEL into schools and systems at the organizational level.

What do we mean by social-emotional learning and well-being?

One of the challenges in writing about social-emotional learning (SEL) and well-being is the lack of consensus in the field about what it means. Although multiple SEL frameworks exist, the big ideas are intuitive and reflect the view that student success in school and beyond depends on more than academics; it also depends on developing a healthy identity, self-management skills, self-awareness, empathy, and supportive relationships. Some of these attributes are associated with skills (e.g., self-awareness) that schools can teach, but they also depend on the characteristics of the learning environment (e.g., is it safe and affirming?).

With this in mind, broad approaches to supporting SEL include teaching students SEL skills, integrating SEL into academic instruction (e.g., collaboration during group work), and creating a supportive, relationship-based learning environment. Especially during the pandemic, discussions about social-emotional well-being often overlap with discussions about mental health. Although related, the goals, focus, and interventions associated with mental health are different from those associated with SEL. For example, SEL typically focuses on all students, while mental health interventions focus on students struggling with specific issues. Similarly, SEL typically uses curricular resources, while mental health interventions typically use evidence-based therapy or other methods.

Two School Networks

This paper is based on document reviews and interviews with leaders from Distinctive Schools and Uplift Education conducted in the spring of 2021. We selected both organizations because of their well-developed SEL approaches. While they aren't necessarily representative of other school systems or charter schools, both networks provide useful ideas for leaders who are interested in developing promising approaches to SEL.

Distinctive Schools has been in operation since 2011 and serves K–12 students in Chicago and Detroit across nine campuses. Among its students, 85 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 19 percent are English language learners, and 13 percent are in special education programs. Sixty-one percent of its students are Hispanic, 26 percent are Black, and 13 percent are white, Asian, multiracial, or of another racial background. Over the last five years, the majority of its schools scored above the seventieth percentile nationwide on the NWEA MAP Growth assessment in both reading and math. At Distinctive Schools, we interviewed the chief education officer; the executive director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; the executive director of student services; the network SEL coordinator; and the network director of instructional coaching and development.

Uplift Education was established in 1996, serving students in grades pre–K through 12 across twenty-one campuses in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area. Of its 21,000 students, 80 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 32 percent are English language learners, and 7 percent are in special education programs. Sixty-eight percent of its students are Hispanic, 20 percent are Black, and 12 percent are white, Asian, multi-racial, or of another racial background. The organization received a B rating from the Texas Education Association for the 2018–19 school year, a rating that was as high as or higher than the local school districts where it operates. At Uplift Education, we spoke to the chief well-being and SEL officer, the SEL director, the chief academic officer, and the chief executive officer.

Leveraging Shared Approaches, Data, and Staffing

It's all too easy for SEL to feel like an add-on to the school day—something that's the responsibility of a subset of teachers, such as an advisory teacher or school counselor. Distinctive Schools and Uplift suggest that doing better means taking a more holistic approach. By selecting a shared approach to SEL, collecting relevant data, and using staffing structures, schools can help make SEL a schoolwide project, rather than extra work for some teachers and staff.

Leveraging Shared Approaches

Both organizations help teachers and staff understand and teach SEL by offering shared programs that define SEL across schools in the networks. These shared approaches and definitions help staff and students alike incorporate SEL into their day-to-day work. A cohesive approach also makes it easier for the networks to support SEL implementation across schools. Sarah Gaw, Distinctive Schools' SEL network coordinator, explained,

> *"If I had to support nine different SEL curriculums, I wouldn't be able to do it very well, and therefore, the campuses probably wouldn't be able to do it very well. There's strength in having that core element."*

Distinctive Schools spent months working with its staff beginning in the 2018–2019 school year to select a networkwide SEL curriculum. Ultimately, the network chose Move This World, which uses interactive videos to support SEL skill development. The network selected the program because it had an evidence base, was deemed adaptive and flexible, and offered a comfortable entry point for teachers who may or may not have prior training in SEL.

"You click on a link. It plays a video. It is completely guided. There are discussion and reflection questions. So, the layout itself is incredibly easy," Gaw explained.

At Uplift Education, leaders decided to create an in-house approach to SEL during the pandemic, rather than purchase one. Called the "Uplift 5," the approach is a simple set of activities to promote wellness and relationships among students and staff. The five activities can be applied to all lessons during the school day:

- A **warm greeting** to make connections and build relationships
- An **emotional check-in** to recognize how people are feeling (e.g., RULER's mood meter for secondary students)
- A **movement** break to ensure people are not sitting for too long
- A **mindful moment** to intentionally connect to being present
- An **optimistic closure** to end the lesson with a recap or moment of gratitude

During the first two weeks of school, students were introduced to the Uplift 5 and teachers were asked to use it every day. According to the network's leadership, the activities also started catching on with adults. "Every leadership meeting, we would throw in one or two of the Uplift 5," said Lisa Schmidt, senior director of SEL at Uplift Education.

Whether using home-grown or purchased resources, the two networks each developed definitions of SEL and approaches and frameworks for systemwide use, rather than leaving it to chance or letting individual schools pick disparate approaches. By going this route, system leaders reported that their networks developed shared understandings, language, and opportunities for joint work on SEL.

Building shared definitions of SEL is only the first step toward integrating SEL within an organization.

Building shared definitions of SEL is only the first step toward integrating SEL within an organization. As the next sections highlight, Distinctive Schools and Uplift Education also supported joint work on SEL by investing in data and staffing.

Leveraging Data

Both Uplift Education and Distinctive Schools collect a range of data about student well-being. By using multiple sources of data, the networks build a more holistic understanding of how their students and staff are doing in ways that inform their efforts to improve.

Distinctive Schools collects data that is closely aligned with the network's skill-based approach to SEL. It uses SELweb to assess the SEL skills it's trying to teach via the Move This World curriculum. Distinctive also collects data using YouthTruth's student survey. While SELweb helps Distinctive assess student competencies, YouthTruth helps leaders and educators understand how students are experiencing school in a systematic way. Michael McCarthy, Distinctive Schools' executive director of student services, explained,

> *"We always did empathy interviews. We always tried to form strong relationships, but we weren't measuring, and we weren't always asking the right questions. And so [YouthTruth] enables us to go in with our flashlights and ask the right questions for any of our initiatives. 'What was that like for students? Let's find out.'"*

When Distinctive Schools' YouthTruth results from last year suggested that students didn't feel like their teachers understood their lives outside of school, the network looked for ways for teachers to make stronger connections with students. "The strategies coming out of that weren't just, 'How are you going to ask kids this question about understanding their life?'" explained McCarthy. "It was much more: 'As we go through starting school in the fall, what will we be doing to build a culture of belonging, safety, hope, and joy?'"

Uplift Education used the Panorama Education's SEL survey to identify students who needed extra attention. Importantly, the network doesn't just collect data about students. Uplift also uses the Gallup 12 survey to measure adult engagement and culture. When the survey revealed negative feelings among staff during the pandemic, system administrators responded by offering schools "culture boosters," such as healthy breakfasts. John Gasko, Uplift's chief well-being and SEL officer, reasoned,

> *"If we could get [teachers] to start feeling better in their bodies, [we believed] that would impact their focus and their sense of hope and belief in themselves."*

Collecting systematic data from students and teachers that's aligned with a vision for SEL helps leaders and educators at Distinctive Schools and Uplift Education analyze and understand how students and staff are doing relative to their SEL visions and adjust in light of what they learn.

Leveraging Strategic Staffing

Both organizations also invest heavily in roles and positions dedicated to student development and well-being. Distinctive Schools' middle schools have a regularly scheduled advisory period led by a teacher. But on top of advisory, every middle school student also has a dedicated adult mentor who is charged with connecting with students one-on-one. Regular classroom teachers and specialists (e.g., art and PE teachers) act as mentors—sometimes, a principal might be a mentor. Mentors check in with individual students once a week for at least fifteen minutes, ensuring every student has a one-on-one adult connection at school.

Stephanie Cardella, Distinctive Schools' executive director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, explained,

> *"The goal is twofold. It's to support students socially and emotionally, because middle school is just a hot mess, with lots of emotions. And it's to provide them an academic touch point: 'Where are you with your projects this week? What support do you need?'"*

Uplift Education also has advisory periods. And, like Distinctive, it invests in dedicated staff to support student development. Uplift also provides something rare in public education: school-based mental health services.[3] Each of Uplift's forty-plus campuses has a licensed mental health counselor. These counselors provide short-term professional mental health services, crisis assessment, and referrals to other support services for those in need.

"They're not a general academic counselor who has to dabble in emotional well-being," explained Dr. Remy Washington, Uplift Education's president. "They are licensed mental health professionals." During the pandemic, Uplift also hired two additional family therapists to provide virtual counseling based on referrals from school-based counselors.

Investments in SEL and a positive environment enhance, rather than detract from, academic learning.

Taking a comprehensive approach that includes shared approaches, data, and strategic staffing is important. While staffing additions can be costly, leaders in both networks say finding the extra resources or redeploying them is worth it. Class sizes at Distinctive Schools, for example, are similar to district-run schools' class sizes, not the smaller class sizes found in some charter schools. Katie O'Connor, the network's chief education officer, explained,

> *"We believe we can build the capacity of teachers to be able to work with a 1:26 ratio. What does that mean? Well, a 1:26 ratio means that there's more room to have the social, emotional learning personnel or the mental health side of the house built out."*

Staffing aside, strategies to support SEL, like the Uplift 5, do not have to be especially costly. But even if they do take additional resources, leaders in both organizations believe that investments in SEL and a positive environment enhance, rather than detract from, academic learning.

Integrating SEL at the Organizational Level

Even if leaders can pull together shared approaches, data, and staffing to weave SEL into the everyday work of a school, that may not fully embed SEL into the life of the school. Distinctive Schools' and Uplift Education's experiences suggest that leaders must also work more broadly to integrate SEL into the school or system at the organizational level. The two networks highlight four ways leaders can do this.

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3 The National Association of School Psychologists estimates on its website that the national ratio of school psychologists to students is 1:1,211 and in some states may approach 1:5,000.

1. Aligning to Values and Goals

Integrating a new program into the daily routine is easier when it resonates with an organization's values and goals. Like many school districts, both Distinctive Schools and Uplift Education have espoused values that underscore the importance of SEL. Indeed, at Distinctive, one of the network's four core values is "wellness," described this way:

> *"We nurture and strengthen the social, emotional, and physical well-being of each member of our school community and intentionally develop habits of success."*

SEL is also a formal part of Distinctive Schools' instructional vision. It's so important, explained Cardella, "that it needs to have its own space in the teaching framework."

Similarly, at Uplift Education, the network's "Whole Scholar Approach" formally signals the importance of SEL. Highlighted in official documents, the approach grounds the network's purpose in developing the academic and social-emotional well-being of every child.

As charter networks, Distinctive and Uplift were founded as mission-driven organizations with clearly defined values and goals. But leaders of existing schools—both charter and traditional—have opportunities to revisit their purpose in ways that can renew, reinforce, and sharpen a shared commitment and value around social-emotional learning. This can signal to current and prospective educators and families that SEL is a priority rather than peripheral.

2. Investing in Adult SEL

In both organizations, leaders emphasized the importance of supporting adults' social-emotional competencies and well-being, as well as students' well-being.

Since most teachers were not exposed to SEL as part of their training programs, both charter organizations invest in training and support to build adult understanding and knowledge. But teachers need more than an understanding of SEL and associated skills to engage in effective teaching strategies to support SEL development. Both schools also help teachers develop their own social-emotional capacity.

"You have to have adult acquisition of SEL first before they can support students," noted Lisa Schmidt, senior director of SEL at Uplift Education. Successful implementation depends in part on whether adults have strong interpersonal skills and can manage their own emotions.

Leaders can also support SEL implementation by investing in adult wellness. The last eighteen months took a toll on teachers, leading to high levels of burnout and stress. Uplift provides a unique set of supports to teachers through both physical and mental well-being

> **Both schools also help teachers develop their own social-emotional capacity.**

programs that include yoga, mindfulness, and nutrition. Uplift Education's Gasko explained,

> *"We ask the question, 'What do educators need to be properly fueled up to do the job, so you can not only survive, but thrive at the same time or flourish?. . . What would happen to student achievement if we just focus a bit more on the health and well-being of the people we're tasking with doing all this stuff?'"*

Yasmin Bhatia, Uplift's CEO, added,

"We're really trying to dig in and let our staff know, 'If you are not emotionally centered and taking care of yourself, it's a stretch that in a pandemic and racial injustice and political-like tensions, you're going to be able to show up and help kids navigate through it.'"

3. Elevating SEL in the Leadership Structure

Leaders can also help integrate SEL into the organization by elevating SEL-focused positions in the leadership structure to ensure they have access to the authority and coordination they need to succeed.

At Distinctive Schools, for example, the network has an SEL director as well as a director of student services who operate on the same level as the network's academic leadership. Katie O'Connor, Distinctive Schools' chief education officer, noted,

"We prioritize resources by way of leadership through what we believe in. One [leader] is all of the academics. And the other is really related to the social-emotional learning student services."

As we describe later, these leaders' central office teams collaborate closely while working with building leaders on developing SEL and academics in their schools.

In addition to an SEL director, Uplift Education has a chief well-being and SEL officer who works on ensuring that students have access to regular and reliable preventive and supportive mental health practices and who also supports the mental health and well-being of adults.

Elevating SEL to executive-level leadership helps ensure that leaders working on SEL have access to resources and decision-making authority. It also helps ensure that SEL is part of key strategic discussions, rather than sidelined in an office with many layers between it and top leaders.

4. Incorporating SEL into Existing Routines

Finally, the experiences of Distinctive Schools and Uplift Education suggest that school leaders can integrate SEL into their organizations by incorporating it into existing routines and procedures, rather than creating entirely new ones.

At Distinctive Schools, for example, network leaders incorporate SEL data into existing quarterly dashboard meetings with schools. These meetings now include a regular routine that starts with conversations around school culture, followed by attendance, engagement, SEL, and academics. Network leaders place academics last on the agenda to ensure enough time is allocated to nonacademic topics. "We never go at academics alone," explains Cardella. "It's always academics and SEL together."

In addition to its dashboard meetings, Distinctive holds monthly meetings between school principals and the network directors for SEL and literacy and math instructional coaching. The group discusses academic and cultural priorities for each campus. Distinctive's teachers also

meet weekly to discuss academic and SEL data. By formally incorporating SEL into existing meetings, the network reinforces its importance and value. Cardella explained,

> *"We know that if SEL data isn't right there with academics, then we're not meeting the whole child."*

At Uplift Education, leaders also incorporate SEL into existing structures. As noted, adults districtwide use the Uplift 5 in class and during meetings. "We have the Uplift 5 embedded in all trainings," explained Schmidt, the SEL director. "We're constantly feeding it into every level of the organization so that everybody gets it." By practicing the Uplift 5 every day in different settings, students and adults view SEL as a routine part of their day.

In short, by aligning SEL with each school's values, attending to adult and student SEL, elevating SEL leaders in the organization, and embedding SEL into regular routines, leaders at Distinctive Schools and Uplift Education help weave SEL into the life of the school, rather than treating it as an add-on. The results help show educators and students that. Sarah Gaw, of Distinctive Schools, explained,

> *"[SEL] is not a phase. It's not just a thing. It's really what we live, breathe, and die for, because we know that if we're not doing that for students, then everything else is for a loss."*

Tight, but Not Too Tight

As leaders embed SEL holistically throughout organizations—especially leaders working at the network or district level—they might find that integrating, aligning, and finding common approaches can run up against a long-standing challenge: How tight is too tight? Distinctive Schools' and Uplift Education's experiences suggest that it's possible to get more aligned without forcing a one-size-fits-all solution on schools. As leaders start to think more systematically about integrating SEL into their organization, they must also find a balance between top-down and bottom-up support for change.

Leaders at Distinctive Schools were aware of the risks of getting this balancing act wrong. On the one hand, if they went too far in the top-down direction, they believed that classroom teachers might push back, looking for more local adaptation and control. "No one likes a cookie-cutter environment," said O'Connor. Top-down approaches can also miss the mark in terms of what students need. "That [top-down] doesn't work for kids, doesn't work for adults, and it certainly doesn't work for an organization."

> **It's possible to get more aligned without forcing a one-size-fits-all solution on schools.**

But a *laissez-faire* approach is also risky and can result in huge discrepancies in terms of teacher capacity and student experiences. Resolving this tight-loose dilemma isn't easy, but Distinctive and Uplift suggest two possible solutions.

The first and most obvious solution is to get crystal clear on what is tight and what is loose in the organization. Distinctive Schools uses specific language for conversations that grapple with this question. Leaders talk about identifying what is "brand" (e.g., tight) and what is "branch" (e.g., loose). This parlance helps leaders and others at Distinctive structure conversations about what the network requires of all schools and where it allows flexibility. The real key to its approach, however, is that it retains the network's connection to the "branch" through robust coaching and support. So as local educators adapt what they are doing at their campus, they still get strong coaching from the network to build out local modifications in ways that complement the network's broader goals and agenda.

Distinctive Schools is tight on goal setting, for example. Its schools must have a goal that addresses student and staff culture. The network is also tight when it comes to procedures for reflecting on a school's progress toward meeting its goals: all schools must complete quarter reflections. On the other hand, the network gives schools flexibility to identify their specific goals in a given area and how they work toward those goals. "We're all moving toward the same direction," Cardella said, "But schools each have the flexibility and autonomy to do it in the way that best meets them, with coaching along the way."

Distinctive takes a similar approach to its SEL curriculum by specifying requirements and areas of flexibility. As O'Connor explained,

> *"[A teacher] who's brand new, just graduated from college, can go to Move This World and literally follow that lesson plan template to the tee. Other teachers who are more veteran might know that, 'Hey, I'm going to take this and I'm going to change it to this order based upon what my kids are. I'm going to add in another second lesson after lunch to do a recap or reconnection or whatever.' And so that's the piece that I'm most proud of is, we have a floor that's there for teachers. That's a must-do there. It meets all of our expectations. But it also provides flexibility for teachers to use their craft and to know their students. And [teachers are] supported by high-quality instructional coaching that has accountability and oversight from the network team."*

Avoiding a cookie-cutter solution isn't only about giving schools flexibility. It's also about ensuring that solutions are responsive to the needs of individual schools and educators. Uplift provides an interesting example of what it means to be responsive to classroom teachers, even as the network provides more central and aligned SEL support.

As noted earlier, Uplift Education invests a lot of resources and attention in adult well-being. The network believes that teachers won't be able to show up effectively for students unless they themselves are healthy. But acting on that belief can be tricky. Uplift's Gasko explained,

> *"We understand that well-being as a journey is new for educators and it dips into the deep end of the pool that can be highly personal and confidential for people. They may think, 'Hey, my own health and stuff is mine and I don't want to talk about it.' It's a turbulent pool."*

In addition to making well-being supports voluntary, Uplift Education also works hard to ensure that these supports are culturally responsive and relevant. Just as SEL curricula for students can lack cultural relevance, Uplift works to ensure that its well-being offerings to adults are culturally relevant. Gasko noted,

"We don't use the term wellness. Wellness is a very whitewashed term and it's typically defined through a white lens, and many communities of color have been traumatized through experimentation."

So, as part of its work ensuring that its well-being initiatives are relevant for teachers, Uplift is intentional about "bringing in yoga teachers of color, people with disabilities, people with different body shapes," Gasko said. "We did that, so everybody felt that they could find themselves at the table." In this way, the leadership challenge involves not just thinking about what is "tight" and what is "loose" but also identifying how to best respond to local needs.

As an Organizational Project, SEL Is a Leadership Project

Both charter organizations suggest that supporting SEL this fall and beyond doesn't just center around instruction or teacher-student relationships. It also involves a host of important leadership tasks, including identifying common approaches, data, and staffing needs. Beyond assembling resources, it involves weaving SEL into the life of the school so that the school itself changes in vital ways.

Leaders heading into the fall must develop a comprehensive whole-school approach to SEL.

To do this work, leaders heading into the fall must develop a comprehensive whole-school approach to SEL. Some supports in the coming months will require extra resources, but others will not require a lot of time or money. In either case, leaders should ask themselves and their teams these pivotal questions:

- How does our SEL work reflect our values? How do our values reflect our SEL work?
- How are we supporting adults, as well as students?
- Where are decisions about SEL happening? Are they in places that have access to authority in the organization?
- How can we fit SEL into our existing routines and approaches? How do we elevate our understanding and analysis of SEL to be on par with how we approach academics?
- As we invest in SEL in our district or school, what will we hold tight and what will we hold loose?
- How can we make sure that our approaches are relevant for students and staff?

Answering these questions will be easier in systems and schools already organized for coherence—those with a clear sense of shared obligations and approaches. In other systems, larger questions will arise: *Who is best positioned to answer questions about SEL and schools as organizations? How is the broader system of finance, support, and governance designed to support them? How is it getting in the way?*

Concerns about supporting students and adults in a more holistic manner will remain at the top of the education agenda for the foreseeable future. To the extent that conversations regarding these concerns overlook the bigger task of leading change in organizations, implementation will be uneven and difficult to support and real change may be elusive. Schools can't afford to silo or segment SEL and student and teacher well-being. To strengthen implementation, leaders must weave SEL into the life of their school or system and recognize that supporting SEL is an organizational project, not just a programmatic one.

Acknowledgments

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