

SEL

Social & Emotional Learning

Austin Independent School District



Austin Independent School District:

Implementation Guide

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning has become a highly dynamic, challenging, and social process. Students need safe, inclusive, culturally responsive, academically engaging, and equitable environments for optimal learning.

As a result, the Austin Independent School District (Austin ISD) has prioritized the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, practices, and approaches into teaching at every level. This implementation guide provides an overview of Austin ISD's SEL story and tips learned along the way.

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SECTION 1

Why Districts Consider SEL

1

WHAT IS SEL?

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is a process for helping children and adults develop fundamental skills for life effectiveness. SEL teaches the skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work, effectively and ethically. These skills include recognizing and managing our emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically.

The Austin Independent School District—which serves more than 80,000 pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade students across 129 schools—prioritizes providing comprehensive educational experiences in optimal learning environments. Focusing on the core SEL competencies that allow students to work together, solve problems, and get ready to learn in the classroom exemplifies this priority.



**Safe, inclusive, culturally responsive,
academically engaging, and
equitable learning environments**

Why Focus on SEL?

Social and Emotional Learning helps children and adults succeed in social, academic, personal, and professional life through the development of a wide range of interpersonal skills, including conflict resolution, decision-making, focusing attention, self-control, problem solving, goal setting, and teamwork. It is the vision of Austin ISD that all students will internalize and demonstrate the social and emotional competencies needed to thrive in school and in life.

Both researchers and educators see positive changes in students participating in SEL programs. The evolving field of neuroscience continues to affirm essential links between SEL, academic performance, and healthy student development.

In particular, Austin ISD has seen positive results in areas of student performance and scores, school climate, attendance, bullying, and behavior. Students taking part in SEL activities increase their academic successes, improve the quality of their relationships with teachers, and decrease the incidence of problem behaviors.[1] SEL programs also reduce students' emotional distress and improve students' social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, and positive social behavior.

These benefits are more evident at campuses with high levels of SEL implementation. As students at both the elementary and secondary school levels reduce their disciplinary infractions, teachers see them getting along better with others, working through their emotions, and paying attention more in class.

[1] The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger (2011)

Below are a few examples of these successes:

IMPROVED ACADEMICS. Teacher ratings of their third-grade students' SEL competencies were positively related to students' performance in state reading and math tests. Additionally, seventh-grade students' ratings of the SEL competency item "I have strong self-control" were positively related to their performance in state reading and math tests.[2]

HIGHER ATTENDANCE RATES. Attendance rates at secondary schools with more years in SEL improved more than attendance rates at other secondary schools.[3]

LOWER CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM. Middle and high schools participating in SEL for more years experienced a greater decrease in chronic absenteeism than did schools participating in SEL for fewer years.[4]

REDUCTIONS IN PROBLEM BEHAVIORS. Secondary SEL schools with more years in SEL showed a greater reduction in campus discretionary removals than did schools with no years in SEL.[5]

POSITIVE INTERACTIONS. Elementary school students with fewer disciplinary infractions received higher teacher ratings of the SEL competency item "respects the property of others" and "gets along well with adults" than students with more disciplinary infractions.[6]

[2] Social and Emotional Learning: Summary of Accomplishments. Department of Research and Evaluation, Austin Independent School District (2016)

[3] Social and Emotional Learning Competency Survey. Department of Research and Evaluation, Austin Independent School District (2016)

[4,5] Social and Emotional Learning: The Effects of Program Implementation and Longevity, 2011-2012 Through 2016-2017. Department of Research and Evaluation, Austin Independent School District (2018)

[6] Social and Emotional Learning Technical Report: Student Level Outcomes, 2015-2016. Department of Research and Evaluation, Austin Independent School District (2017)



SECTION 2

The Austin ISD SEL Story

2

SEL IMPLEMENTATION STORY

As one of the first urban education districts in the nation to commit to the development of the whole child by implementing an SEL program, Austin ISD receives widespread local and national recognition for its efforts. Since implementing the pilot SEL program in 2010, the district has observed that SEL creates a culture of caring and responsibility, and learning environments where youth can thrive. Austin ISD's SEL strategic plan, first approved in 2011 and revised for 2017-2020, drives SEL implementation.

Austin ISD worked through the district's vertical team structure to implement Social and Emotional Learning. A vertical team consists of a high school and all of its feeder schools. Within five years (2012-2016), SEL was implemented at all Austin ISD schools.

Below is an overview of Austin ISD's scale-up of the SEL program:

- 2011-12**  **AUSTIN ISD BEGINS IMPLEMENTING SEL IN TWO VERTICAL TEAMS**
Crockett High School and Austin High School were chosen as the first two vertical teams to implement SEL.
- 2012-13**  **THREE ADDITIONAL VERTICAL TEAMS WERE ADDED**
Implementation began with Eastside Memorial, McCallum and Travis high schools' vertical teams.
- 2013-14**  **SEL IMPLEMENTATION EXPANDS TO SEVEN VERTICAL TEAMS**
Akins High School and part of LBJ High School vertical teams were added.
- 2014-15**  **TWO ADDITIONAL VERTICAL TEAMS JOIN**
Bowie High School and Reagan High School vertical teams were added, along with the remaining schools within the LBJ High School vertical team.
- 2015-16**  **SEL IMPLEMENTATION GOES DISTRICT-WIDE**
As of 2015-16, all schools in Austin ISD were officially implementing SEL, including 86 elementary schools, 18 middle schools, 17 high schools, and 8 special campuses.

SEL in Action

Elementary and middle schools in these teams have received explicit instruction materials from Second Step. Lessons are designed to be taught weekly and reinforced in all areas of the school. High schools have received School-Connect as their explicit instruction resource. Some use School-Connect in advisory class; others have students participate in Restorative Practices; still others use approaches such as developing lessons based on needs informed by campus data. In six high schools, a Methods for Academic and Personal Success (MAPS) class is being taught to freshmen to develop social, emotional, and study skills, supporting students as they make the transition to high school.

In addition to explicit SEL skills instruction, SEL has become central to academics and school climate and culture.

- All schools are implementing the district's Whole Child, Every Child initiative, a collaborative effort that frames SEL as a district-wide effort, not an isolated program.
- All teachers and principals receive targeted professional development in SEL.
- Master teachers and content specialists now integrate SEL objectives and instructional methods into all exemplar lessons in all subject areas.
- The athletics department is using mindfulness strategies.
- Additionally, the focus extends beyond the school buildings into the community.
- Through partnering with community organizations, students and families can locate services and supports that address academic enrichment and support, as well as social, emotional, and behavioral health.
- The district has also provided training in SEL to multiple out-of-school providers.

SEL and Mindfulness

All campuses have received some level of exposure to mindfulness practices by the district's mindfulness specialist, and professional learning opportunities exist for the development of mindful leaders.

SEL Leadership

SEL work in Austin ISD is supported by a strong Department of Social and Emotional Learning. The department has a dedicated director of social and emotional learning, an SEL assistant director, and a communications coordinator. Each campus has a dedicated SEL specialist and two on-site facilitators.

The SEL specialist supports implementation on campus by providing professional development, observing lessons and giving feedback on integration of SEL skills as well as explicit instruction, developing campus plans with the steering committee, and setting SEL goals with campus leadership.

Campus SEL facilitators serve as the liaison with the district's SEL department and lead the campus steering committee which guides the school's SEL work.

SEL Evaluation

The Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) works in conjunction with the SEL team to design and conduct formative and summative program evaluations. The evaluations report objectively about program implementation and outcomes, and serve to inform program staff, decision makers, and planners in the district. Austin ISD's SEL department has three dedicated DRE staff members who regularly issue SEL reports used to help guide campus and district-wide SEL planning.



A parent participating in a literacy/SEL training session spoke about her journey and goals she has for herself. The parent is an English Language Learner (ELL) and has had many challenges. In a subsequent session, she shared how discussing challenges and triumphs with her child felt very fulfilling.

SEL SUCCESS STORY

Implementation Results



Elementary schools with high SEL integration ratings had **7% more students pass** the Texas STAAR test in reading and math in 2015.



Discipline referral rates **decreased 45% at elementary schools** and **decreased 29% at middle and high schools** within three to four years of SEL implementation.



Student climate survey results show that in regard to school connectedness, middle and high school students are able to talk about their problems with adults at schools more, **improving 30+% year over year.**



Middle and high schools participating in SEL for more years experienced a **greater decrease in chronic absenteeism** than did schools participating in SEL for fewer years.



SECTION 3

What Districts Should Consider Before Implementing SEL

3

TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

CASEL has created a framework of 10 essential areas for systematically implementing SEL throughout a district (<https://drc.casel.org/>).

Districts that implemented these 10 components saw improvements in school climate, behavior, attendance, graduation rates, and academic achievement. There is no right way to go about implementation. It will look different in every district, depending on the school and community context.



In Austin ISD, the district rolled out SEL by vertical team, supported by a systemic approach to implementation that was collaborative and flexible. While Austin ISD implemented the following 10 areas since the initial pilot, the district did not follow this exact order.

Austin ISD invites other districts to use these tips as a guide for ideas rather than as a checklist.

1. Communication

Communicate SEL as a priority to stakeholders.

To-Do: Create an SEL communication plan that answers four key questions:

- Who do you want to reach? (your audience)
 - What do you want to achieve? (the goal)
 - What do you want to say? (the message)
 - How will you send your message? (the medium)
-

2. Vision/Mission

Develop a district-wide vision and plan.

To-Do: Develop a shared mission and vision for SEL:

- A vision statement that articulates the priority of SEL in your overall district vision.
 - A mission statement that articulates what the district will do to move toward the SEL vision.
-

3. Align Resources

Align financial and human resources.

To-Do: Develop a funding strategy that can survive changes in leadership, politics, and the economy. Take a close look at:

- Your district's existing budget
 - Your district's priorities and goals
 - The resources currently dedicated to SEL (funding, staff, etc.)
 - Future resources required for SEL support and expansion (staff, professional learning, curriculum, etc.)
-

4. Build Expertise

Develop central office expertise and competence.

To-Do: Cultivate both SEL expertise and the competence of those who work in district offices, that will allow leaders to:

- Communicate the importance of SEL to staff, funders, students, families, and the community.
 - Increase capacity for SEL-informed decision-making.
 - Plan strategically for integrating SEL into the district budget. Identify new opportunities for SEL integration and resource alignment.
 - Design and implement hiring practices that reflect the desire to include diverse backgrounds and viewpoints.
 - Engage in professional learning to enhance SEL implementation including areas such as cultural competence.
-

5. Needs Assessment

Conduct an SEL-related needs and resources assessment.

To-Do: Take a "snapshot" of your district's SEL-related activities, resources, and needs, including:

- Existing programs and practices that your district can build upon.
 - Gaps where programs, practices, or policies may be needed.
 - Resources that may enable your district to maximize the impact of SEL.
-



Starting out our week with explicit SEL instruction and integrating skills throughout the week is an absolute necessity. My students need to set an intention with SEL and I do too! It sets the tone for learning success with a positive attitude!

KINDERGARTEN TEACHER

Second Year of SEL Implementation

6. Professional Learning

Design and implement effective professional learning programs.

To-Do: Offer professional learning experiences ranging from:

- Conferences and workshops
- Webinars and online courses
- Professional learning communities
- Coaching support

7. Integration

Integrate SEL with district initiatives.

To-Do: Through SEL integration, ensure that SEL influences a wide range of areas throughout the district, including:

- Instructional practices and curriculum
- Culture and climate
- Student discipline
- Systems of support
- Family engagement
- Out-of-school time
- Athletics
- Board practices
- College and career readiness
- Assessment
- Human Resources
- Professional learning

8. Programming

Adopt and implement evidence-based programs.

To-Do: Implement SEL programs that have a strong research base with proven outcomes as they are:

- Intended to be a universal approach delivered to all students.
- One of the key approaches to promoting SEL in schools.



“

We like using the peace path and conflict resolution script because then we can solve the problem on our own.

ELEMENTARY STUDENT

9. Standards

Establish K-12 SEL standards.

To-Do: Develop standards that will become the district's "blueprint" for instruction in SEL, which will help in:

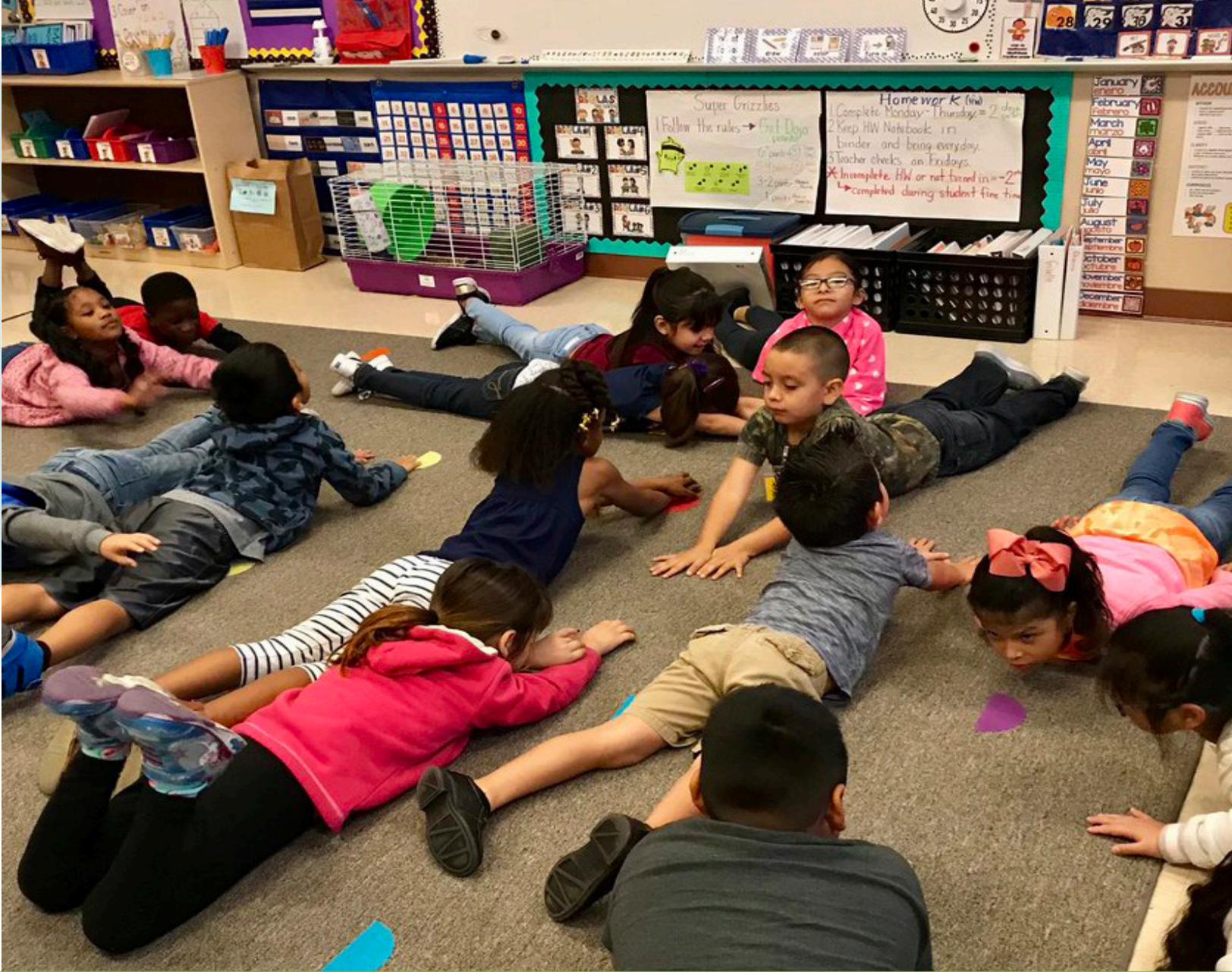
- Identifying specific goals and benchmarks for student SEL, grade by grade.
- Articulating what students should know and be able to do related to SEL.

10. Continuous Improvement

Establish systems for continuous improvement.

To-Do: Explore two key components of continuous improvement:

- Defining SEL goals and metrics: determine what you want to measure and how you want to measure it.
- Using data to drive implementation: collect data about SEL implementation and the impact of SEL practices to help determine where processes can be improved.



SECTION 4

What Sustainable Practices Look Like on Austin ISD Campuses

4

IMPLEMENTATION TO INTEGRATION

2017 marked the first year of the roll-out of the SEL 2.0 strategic plan, which is intended to deepen the SEL work within Austin ISD and the community over the next three to five years.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, Austin ISD, along with SEL lead donors, sponsored a fellowship for 14 district leaders in various roles. This group engaged in an intensive learning experience in social and emotional learning. Fellows had numerous opportunities to participate directly with some of the nation's leading experts in neuroscience, child and youth development, and program design. From the onset, the fellows understood their charge: **To bring their unique, functional expertise and insights to help define the future of SEL within the district.**

Over 12 months, with additional input from parents, teachers and students, Austin ISD clarified its SEL vision and developed five priorities to guide the district's SEL work and capture the evolution in thinking about how best to achieve SEL integration district-wide.

Since then, Austin ISD has welcomed other leaders and staff, including assistant superintendents, principals, and SEL team members, to participate in the fellowship. This fellowship has developed from being a planning team to a series of groups engaged in a professional learning cohort, offering SEL growth opportunities and allowing for continuous input and direction around social and emotional learning.

Austin ISD SEL Priorities

1

Strengthen Austin ISD's culture by embracing the principles of Social and Emotional Learning district-wide—from the boardroom to the classroom and into the community.

2

Develop the social and emotional knowledge and competencies of all district staff to create the environments that optimize teaching and learning.

3

Leverage the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning to advance Austin ISD's commitment to cultural proficiency, inclusiveness, and equity.

4

Develop an innovative integrated system of social, emotional, and mental health support for students that includes and extends beyond SEL.

5

Contribute to the national evidence base for Social and Emotional Learning.

2017-18 MARKED THE INAUGURAL YEAR OF THE SEED MODEL CAMPUS COHORT



SEL Seed Model Campuses

Austin ISD believes that true district change happens when we create learning structures and systems that cross campus boundaries and encourage all-district learning and communities of practice. In this effort, the district offers an SEL Seed Model Campus Cohort, in which campuses develop a year-long plan to engage in learning and growth opportunities around four categories:

- Empowering Campus Leadership
- Coordination With Family and Community Partners
- Coordination With Climate and Pedagogy
- Explicit SEL Instruction

The SEL Seed Model designation is given to schools that effectively demonstrate the process of continual social and emotional growth. At the end of the cohort program, all campuses engage in a Seed Model Campus Share Fair with district leaders, colleagues, and community partners, where they showcase their SEL progress around the goals they've set in the four categories above.

Austin ISD's Seed Model Campus Cohort started with 19 schools participating in Year 1 and added another 52 schools in Year 2.

45

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Year 1: 9 Elementary Schools
Year 2: 36 Elementary Schools

13

MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Year 1: 5 Middle Schools
Year 2: 8 Middle Schools

13

HIGH SCHOOLS

Year 1: 5 High Schools
Year 2: 8 High Schools



I was walking a scholar to my classroom and asked him if he had done the breathing sheet with a parent. He said he had done it three times with his mom. Then he said his mom told him she was really mad at work yesterday and did the breathing at work and it helped her calm down.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LIBRARIAN



SEL Funding in Austin ISD

As the SEL initiative has been scaled to include all schools, budgets have risen as well—from \$690,000 to more than \$2 million in recent years. The district has supplemented local funding with federal funding for its specialists, a central part of the implementation strategy. A local philanthropic matching program yielded \$2.4 million in three years. The district has a dedicated fund development team comprised of internal and external leaders. Austin ISD has taken multiple steps to communicate about the importance of the work with all stakeholders—from the board and cabinet to parents, students, and the community.

Funding Spotlight: Local Benefactors

Local benefaction has been a primary source of support for Austin SEL adoption and implementation. Early funding came from three local foundations—Buena Vista Foundation, Tapestry Foundation, and the Klein Foundation. Funding was used for early implementation to off-set Title II funds for SEL positions. In 2012-2013, these benefactors issued a \$1 million challenge grant over three years for SEL; Austin ISD raised \$530,000 toward the challenge grant. In 2016-2017, Austin ISD received a \$1.7 million grant from W.K. Kellogg Foundation to support parent empowerment related to SEL skills for their children. Most recently, Austin ISD has secured \$5 million in philanthropic funds through 2020, including a \$2 million pledge from the original benefactors and \$3 million from the St. David's Foundation.



For more information:

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www.austinisd.org/sel