The Collaborating States Initiative (CSI) Recommended Process for Developing State Policies and Guidelines to Support Social and Emotional Learning

By Linda Dusenbury and Nick Yoder
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In our work with states over the years, 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 guidelines to support SEL. To provide guidance to states wanting to implement SEL policies and guidelines, the current document provides the 14 steps that the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and American Institutes for Research (AIR) have observed some states and districts have taken in these areas. At the beginning, it is important for state or district teams to become familiar with and be constantly thinking about all steps outlined in this brief to lay the necessary groundwork for each of the activities when the time arrives. Figure 1 offers a flow chart of the process for writing and implementing SEL policies and guidelines (which may include learning goals or standards for student social and emotional competencies).

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

- [Development and Implementation of Standards for Social and Emotional Learning in the 50 States: A Brief on Findings From CASEL's Experience](#)

- [Social and Emotional Learning for Illinois Students Policy, Practice, and Progress: How Illinois SEL Standards Came to Be and What the State Has Learned Through Putting Them Into Practice](#)

- [A Process for Developing and Articulating Learning Goals or Competencies for Social and Emotional Learning](#)

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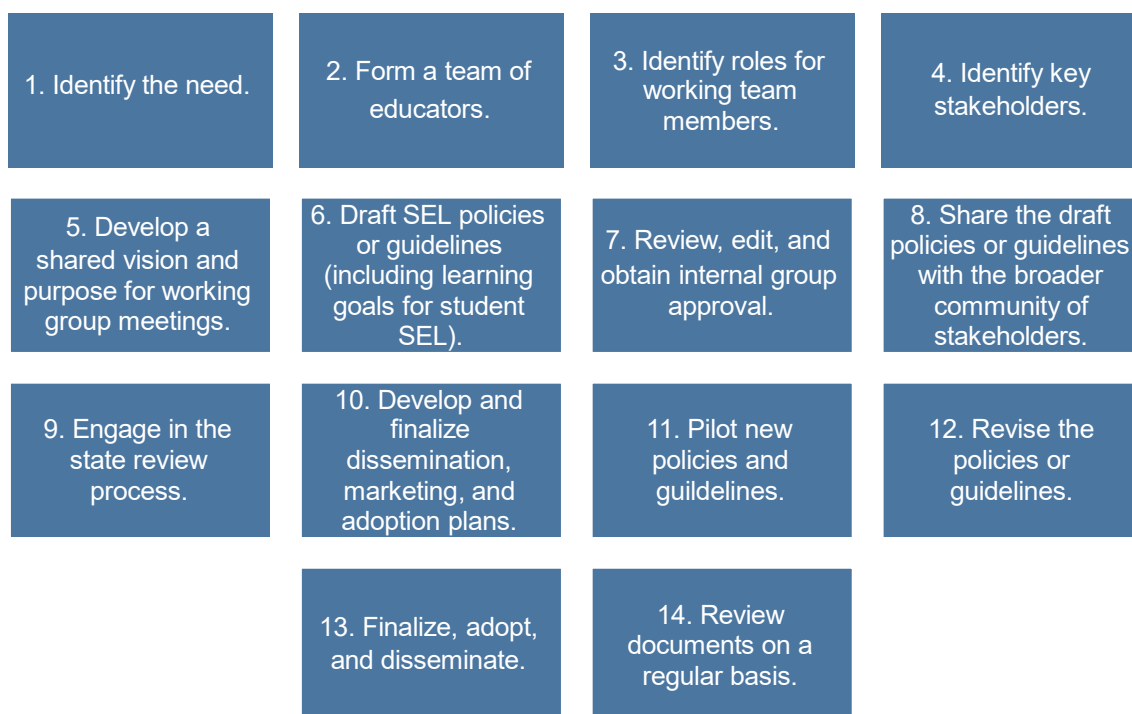
How to Use This Document

This document is intended for state education agencies (SEAs) that want to implement SEL policies and guidelines. This document is intended to help guide SEAs through the process of developing, implementing, and sustaining SEL policies and practices across the state. This document identifies steps SEAs may want to take to complete the process, and should be used in combination with more content-driven documents (e.g., *Key Features of High-Quality Policies and Guidelines to Support Social and Emotional Learning*). The steps found within this document are not necessarily sequential, and an SEA may find that they need to go through the process multiple times depending on the number of policies and guidelines implemented. For example, the SEA 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.

Contact consultants at CASEL or AIR for further information and support.

Figure 1. Steps to Writing SEL Policies or Guidelines

1. Identify the need.	2. Form a team of educators.	3. Identify roles for working team members.	4. Identify key stakeholders.
5. Develop a shared vision and purpose for working group meetings.	6. Draft SEL policies or guidelines (including learning goals for student SEL).	7. Review, edit, and obtain internal group approval.	8. Share the draft policies or guidelines with the broader community of stakeholders.
9. Engage in the state review process.	10. Develop and finalize dissemination, marketing, and adoption plans.	11. Pilot new policies and guildelines.	12. Revise the policies or guidelines.
	13. Finalize, adopt, and disseminate.	14. Review documents on a regular basis.	

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. In other words, the SEA should answer 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 will students need to be successful, now and in the future?" "How can SEL build upon the work that we are already doing in the state?" "Why is SEL important for multiple stakeholders, including educators and employers?" By

American Institutes for Research, and
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

CSI Recommended Process for Developing
State Policies or Guidelines to Support SEL—2

answering these key questions at the outset, the SEA can better develop a plan for their SEL efforts and create buy-in and engagement from stakeholders and key leaders.

2. **Form teams of stakeholders**. Most teams begin by forming two groups: an active working group and a broader group of key stakeholders.

   a. *Working group*. The working group is usually responsible for the development of policies and guidelines. This process generally takes six months to one year or more, depending on the degree to which the team draws from existing resources from other states and districts. The working group usually meets regularly (approximately once a month). In addition, the working group actively cultivates relationships with key stakeholders, 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 begin helping with the process of developing policies or guidelines (including learning goals or competencies for SEL).

   b. *Key stakeholders*. 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), but they are kept informed and consulted throughout the work in progress. 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 release and promotion of the new policies, or guidelines.

3. **Identify roles for working team members**. The working team is usually composed of key leaders and contributors. Typically, there are three key leadership roles, which are sometimes combined: group coordinator/lead, lead writer/editor, and liaison to key stakeholders. Teams range in size from three to 20 team members, depending on the needs of working group and who the key leaders think needs to be involved. It is helpful when team members are representative from multiple offices within the department, including representatives of instruction, student supports, academic standards, school improvement, safe and supportive schools, early learning, afterschool, athletics, educator effectiveness, counseling, mental health, special education, and field services.

   When identifying working team members, it is important to have individuals in leadership roles within academic and student support departments. Ideally, there will be individuals who have experience developing policies or guidelines in the past, as well as expertise in SEL. In addition, ensure the working group is composed of a diverse group with regard to race and ethnicity. If there are districts in your state with experience implementing SEL, then involve teachers, administrators, social workers, or counselors from that district if possible. Furthermore, involve someone from early learning—ideally someone who is familiar with or was involved in developing SEL learning goals, competencies, or standards for preschool. Because preschool guidance documents are likely to have come from the perspective of the "whole child," they often have many of the features of high-quality policies and guidelines for SEL and can be especially helpful when developing SEL policies or guidelines for the K–12 level.

4. **Identify key stakeholders.** States vary in the number of key stakeholders who are involved in the development of SEL policies and guidelines. Key stakeholders may include representatives from a large number (up to 40 or more) of offices within the department of education, other state departments, and outside organizations (e.g., advocacy groups for SEL, teacher education, school boards, governor's office, legislative officials, principal and teacher organizations, public health, children and families, mental health, and afterschool). Involve stakeholders who can be helpful in supporting and promoting the work, including review or adoption of policies or guidelines when the time comes. When identifying which key stakeholders to include, there are a number of questions to think about: Who are the key voices that can help make dissemination and adoption of the policies or guidelines a success? Who will be important to promote and champion the new policies or guidelines? Who in key leadership needs to be cultivated to avoid possible resistance later on?

    Throughout the design and development process, it is important to cultivate the support and endorsement of the commissioner and other state leaders by sharing updates and keeping them informed of and excited about your process.

5. **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 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 within the state 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 policy or guidelines. Some of the immediate decisions to be made include the following:

    a. What is our goal? What is our desired end result or what outcomes do we want sudents to achieve? Every state is different, and the needs and goals of each are unique. The state team needs to develop goals that are most relevant and meaningful for their state. Once those goals have been identified, the Collaborating States Initiative (CSI) may be helpful in identifying experts (from within the state, if possible) and/or resources that may support the work toward those particular goals and identify indicators to measure student progress.

    b. 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? Suggestions can be found in this Policy Snapshot: *Social and Emotional Skills for Life and Career: Policy Levers that Focus on the Whole Child*.

    c. What does the research tell us? Review resources such as summaries of the definition and framework of SEL (e.g., Why Social and Emotional Learning Is Essential for Students), useful videos (e.g., 5 Keys to Social and Emotional Learning Success) as well as important research:

        i. A meta-analysis of 213 studies and more than 270,000 students (P–12), has shown that programs designed to promote social and emotional competence in students produce important outcomes including improvements in standardized academic test

scores that are, on average, 11 percentile points higher for students who received SEL programming than students who did not receive SEL (Durlak et al., 2011).

    ii. The cost effectiveness of these approaches has been established in a recent report finding that programs designed to promote social and emotional competence produce, on average, a benefit to cost ratio of 11:1 (Belfield et al., 2015).

d. What is our shared definition around SEL? What frameworks could we use or does the state already use (e.g., CASEL framework, 21st Century Skills, Employability Skills Framework)?

e. 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?)*

f. What is the format we will use? What will be the age bands? As much as possible, we recommend using formats widely used in your state, or from 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.

g. What additional resources will we use to help us develop SEL policies or guidelines (including the memo, *Key Features of High Quality Policies and Guidelines to Support SEL,* and the brief, What Evidence-Based SEL Looks Like, In Practice)?

h. What process will we use to develop the SEL policies or guidelines? How will we draft the policies or guidelines? Will we cowrite the policies or guidelines as a group, or will one person write them, to be reviewed by all? What will be the timeline?

i. Are the policies or guidelines we develop going to be voluntary or mandatory? If we want them to be voluntary, is there certain language we will need to use to avoid 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 board or department?

j. 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 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 important to consult with the SEA Communications Department when developing a strategic plan for communications. Developing a thoughtful plan for communications 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.

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CSI Recommended Process for Developing
State Policies or Guidelines to Support SEL—5

6. **Draft SEL policies or guidelines**. Once clear goals and a group process are established, the working group drafts the policies or guidelines. We have observed that generally working groups take two approaches when drafting policies or guidelines.

   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. In this case, the challenge of the working group might be to make modifications or fill gaps for their state.

   If your team is developing learning goals or competencies for SEL please see the following memo for details: *Process for Developing and Articulating Learning Goals or Competencies for Social and Emotional Learning.*

   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 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.

7. **Review, edit, and obtain internal 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 the policies or guidelines read in a consistent voice. In addition, at least two to three national experts, including the expert identified in step 1, can review the policies or guidelines to ensure the document (s) reflects the most current research in the field.

   After the working group conducts this final review and feedback is received from experts, a final *draft* of the policies or guidelines should be complete.

8. **Share the draft policies or guidelines with the broader community of stakeholders.** 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 draft.

9. **Engage in the state review process**. Every state 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 the state's procedures. Ensure that the SEA is clear on the process for review, including how to collect a broad array of feedback from multiple stakeholders, and how to use feedback to revise and edit the SEL policies and guidelines.

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CSI Recommended Process for Developing
State Policies or Guidelines to Support SEL—6

10. **Develop and finalize dissemination, marketing, and adoption plans**. Throughout the process and continuing during the state review process, the state team should consult with the larger group of key stakeholders (individually or as a group) 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 overcome resistance to implementing SEL.

Determine how you want to release documents to the public. For example, many states that develop SEL learning goals release them when they also have an implementation guide or professional development plan to support implementation

11. **Pilot new policies or guidelines**. Another important activity before and during the state 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 supports that may be necessary to ensure the new policies or guidelines will be successful. Conduct focus groups in districts and schools working with the draft 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).

12. **Revise the policies or guidelines**. Teams often find it necessary to revise the new policies or guidelines using feedback received during the state review process and consultation with key stakeholders to prepare fully for the official release.

13. **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 in working with districts and schools. The adoption and dissemination process is extremely important to consider during the review and revision step.

14. **Review documents on a regular basis.** Education is a multifaceted field with many moving parts. 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.

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CSI Recommended Process for Developing
State Policies or Guidelines to Support SEL—7