

# Social and Emotional Learning: Best Practices and Barriers to Successful Implementation





## Executive Summary

To better understand the factors that influence social and emotional learning (SEL) implementation in the Austin Independent School District (AISD), researchers from the AISD Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) conducted six case studies in Fall 2018. From focus groups and interviews with students, teachers, and other staff members at elementary, middle, and high schools in AISD, four themes emerged as influential to SEL implementation: (a) **campus organizational capacity**, (b) **coordinated leadership**, (c) **staff capacity-building processes**, and (d) **school culture**. The following provides a brief overview of the relationship between these themes:

- When campus organizational capacity was high, campus leadership was empowered to determine the vision, scope, and structure for SEL; to translate that vision into action; and to build on that vision over time. When organizational capacity was low, the vision for SEL was unclear, and leaders had more difficulty sustaining SEL work.
- With high organizational capacity and a clear vision for SEL, coordinated leadership involved consistent and sustained capacity-building support for teachers and other school staff, meaning that SEL specialists and facilitators regularly provided staff learning opportunities and supported instruction with culturally and developmentally relevant curriculum.
- With high organizational capacity; a clear vision for SEL; and sustained, supportive, coordinated leadership who provided relevant materials, guidance, support, and feedback to teachers, SEL was more firmly ingrained into the school culture, and opportunities for SEL were more easily identified and leveraged. When capacity building support was inconsistent or irrelevant, teachers were less likely to buy in and take advantage of SEL opportunities.

Based on case study discussions, the following recommendations are intended to maximize opportunities for SEL implementation and learning:

- Continue identifying, coaching, and supporting campus SEL leaders, as they are crucial to creating, executing, and sustaining each school's vision for SEL
- Strengthen change-management support for schools that experience leadership turnover or elimination of services (e.g., Communities in Schools), as these disruptions can cause significant stress to staff and students
- Strengthen parent, caregiver, and family engagement, which would bolster each school's sense of community and reinforce SEL skill development at home
- Leverage culturally and developmentally relevant evidence-based SEL curriculum as a means of empowering teachers to implement SEL curriculum that speak to students' lives inside and outside school
- Restructure advisory classes so students and teachers have an existing, ongoing relationship, which (along with relevant curriculum and greater administrative oversight and participation) should better incentivize teachers to build relationships with students and instill SEL into the school culture

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## Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL). Research on SEL interventions shows many positive effects for students, including higher academic performance, more positive attitudes about the self and others, increased pro-social behavior, and reduced conduct problems and emotional distress (Mahoney, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2019).

Austin Independent School District (AISD) has supported the district-wide acquisition and development of student SEL skills since the 2011–2012 school year. To better understand the factors that influence SEL implementation at AISD schools, staff from the AISD Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) conducted case studies at six schools (two elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools), with the goal of obtaining a variety of perspectives from across AISD.

## What factors influence SEL implementation?

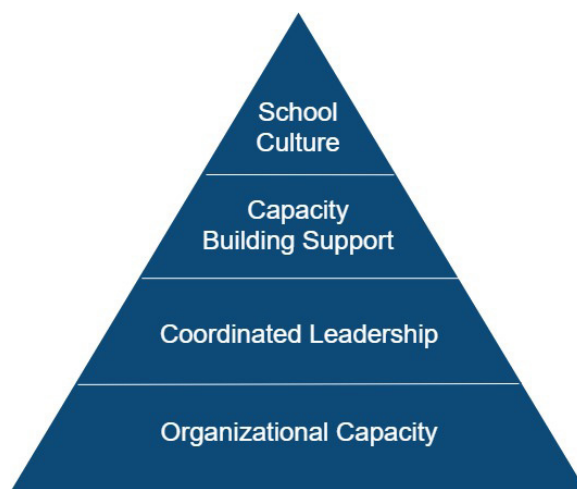
In Fall 2018, DRE staff conducted focus groups with students and teachers at each case study school. When possible, DRE staff interviewed principals, counselors, and other campus staff and observed SEL committee meetings and other relevant events. Four themes emerged from these activities that appeared to significantly influence SEL implementation: (a) **campus organizational capacity**, (b) **coordinated leadership**, (c) **staff capacity-building processes**, and (d) **school culture**. These themes exist within a system of interconnected SEL-related processes (Appendix 1) and build off each other to empower school leaders, teachers, and students to build SEL skills; strengthen relationships; and ultimately, improve school culture (Figure 1). In theory, leadership is empowered to achieve its goals when a school has enough organizational capacity to run smoothly. Factors such as staff turnover and inadequate support from the district or third-party service providers hinder a school’s ability to operate smoothly. When a school has enough capacity to operate without constant disruption, campus leadership can devote time, space, and resources to creating and executing a plan for SEL implementation. This, in turn, requires consistent interactions between key SEL players (discussed in this report) to build staff’s capacity to implement SEL, which, if done with fidelity, should lead to improved SEL skills; healthier relationships; and consequently, a better school culture.

The following sections provide a brief description of each theme as it was observed at case study schools.

### Campus Organizational Capacity

**Campus organizational capacity refers to the resources and personnel necessary to meet each school’s operational needs.** According to district rules regarding campus enrollment thresholds, some AISD elementary schools do not have a full-time **assistant principal** or **parent support specialist (PSS)**, both of whom are influential in ensuring that school staff can meet the needs of students and their families. Other district-level resources and supports, such as **school mental health centers (SMHCs)** and **learning support centers (LSCs)**, support students with trauma-related needs. Third-party service providers, such as **Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)** and **Communities in Schools (CIS)**, act as an additional support for at-risk students by providing social services and support through a campus-based specialist or social worker. Focus group participants indicated that the limited or inconsistent availability of resources and support

Figure 1  
Foundations of Campus SEL Implementation



resulted in a significant burden on school staff. A few case study schools had recently lost service providers due to campus-level enrollment and demographic changes, which further burdened school staff to meet students' needs.

**Staff turnover** also influenced organizational capacity and SEL implementation. In some cases, turnover was an opportunity to hire people with values and beliefs more aligned with the school's culture and the tenets of SEL. In other cases, turnover was a barrier to meeting students' needs due to the lengthy process of identifying and training a replacement. Turnover in SEL facilitators had a similarly mixed effect, as strong facilitators ingrained SEL into the school culture and built off past success. SEL implementation would suffer greatly with the loss of a school's SEL champion. Lastly, teachers discussed SEL specialist turnover as a barrier to building SEL capacity, as new specialists needed time to build relationships, gain buy-in, and understand each school's contextual needs before their services and expertise were widely known and used.

## Coordinated Leadership

**Coordinated leadership refers to the people and processes involved in determining the vision, scope, and structure of SEL.** It requires effective communication and coordination between the school principal, SEL specialist, SEL facilitators, and SEL steering committee members. **SEL specialists** are district-level SEL experts who support teachers and other school staff by coaching, modeling, observing, and providing feedback and other evidence-based curriculum, strategies, and resources. Eleven SEL specialists support 120 AISD campuses, meaning that schools generally interact with SEL specialists on a weekly to monthly basis. **SEL facilitators** are campus staff (usually teachers or counselors) who serve as SEL champions for the school. Facilitators regularly meet with SEL specialists; engage in ongoing coaching and capacity-building activities; and recruit staff members to serve on an **SEL steering committee**, which plans for SEL-related curriculum and learning opportunities. SEL specialists and facilitators were frequently mentioned by focus group participants as crucial to ensuring the success of SEL activities. Principals, as school leaders, were similarly discussed as crucial to fostering buy-in and providing time for teachers and students to engage in SEL skill development. Teachers frequently discussed the importance of having a principal who authentically engaged in and was supportive of SEL-related work, which signaled to staff and students that SEL was part of the school identity and culture. Conversely, challenges to SEL implementation were generally discussed alongside issues related to uncoordinated leadership and inadequate organizational capacity.

In theory, these campus leaders determine how to incorporate SEL into the school culture and pedagogy. At elementary schools, focus group participants discussed schoolwide SEL-related initiatives that promoted character strengths and virtues through whole-school events and weekly SEL lessons. In middle and high schools, SEL was incorporated into advisory periods, though some school-wide SEL initiatives were discussed and observed as well. SEL lessons in advisory periods generally took the form of community-building circles, where students and staff gathered in a circle and took turns responding to a conversational topic, usually provided by the SEL specialist or facilitator, with the goal of fostering connections and encouraging SEL skill development. Based on discussions with teachers, SEL implementation during advisory periods was inconsistent due to (a) the absence of an existing relationship between staff and students, (b) competing demands for time and attention, (c) low or inconsistent expectations for how to use advisory, and (d) minimal incentives or accountability from school administration.

**Underlying each school's SEL vision are shared expectations, shared language, and cultural and developmental relevance of SEL content and curriculum.** Shared expectations refer to a common understanding and awareness of SEL-related work, including when it occurred (e.g., weekly classroom lessons, advisory periods, periodic school-wide events) and who was responsible for the work (e.g., counselors were responsible for organizing a school-wide event, teachers were expected to regularly incorporate SEL into instruction or advisory). **Shared language refers to the common vocabulary used by staff and students to talk about SEL-related concepts.** Consistent use of shared language indicated SEL concepts were ingrained in the school culture. One important nuance

was that SEL sounded different at each school. The underlying SEL concepts are universal, but the language and vocabulary were reflective of each school's unique context and culture. **Cultural relevance refers to adapting SEL curriculum to be respectful of and relevant to the unique mix of cultures and backgrounds at each school.** Similarly, **SEL content is developmentally relevant when it focuses on topics or scenarios that are directly relevant to students' stage of life.** As explained in more detail later in this report, high school students and teachers were the most vocal about the cultural and developmental irrelevance of SEL curriculum, further highlighting the need for SEL leaders to identify and disseminate more relevant curriculum as a means of gaining buy-in and improving implementation.

## Capacity Building Processes

SEL capacity-building processes strengthen teachers' knowledge, skills, and ability to provide explicit SEL instruction. Capacity building generally involves the dissemination of information from the SEL specialist or facilitator(s) to campus staff. Examples include the SEL specialist or facilitator(s) (a) **providing resources to teachers** (e.g., scripts for conducting a community-building circle); (b) **modeling, teaching, or coaching specific techniques or strategies** (e.g., demonstrating how to conduct a community-building circle); and (c) **observing SEL instructional strategies and giving feedback to teachers.**

Through these capacity-building processes and practices, campus staff acquire and internalize a shared language with which to talk about SEL concepts, and consequently, are better prepared to effectively teach those concepts to students. In discussions, school staff frequently mentioned the capacity-building support offered by the SEL specialist or facilitator as supportive factors to successful SEL implementation. Conversely, the absence of strong support from the SEL specialist or facilitator(s) correlated with teachers feeling SEL was not implemented with fidelity. Furthermore, teachers discussed the delicate balance of autonomy and support. Autonomy to implement SEL lessons, when accompanied with relevant support from the specialist or facilitator, allowed teachers to adapt or create SEL lessons responsive to students' wants and needs. Conversely, too much teacher autonomy to implement SEL, in the absence of consistent, relevant capacity building support, was discussed as a factor leading to inconsistent SEL implementation.

## School Culture

**School culture can be conceptualized as the prevailing social norms, values, and sense of community that influence how people interact on campus.** Culture at case study schools appeared to be largely influenced by the norms, values, and language of campus leadership, which were communicated to teachers and directly and indirectly to students. Case study elementary schools were characterized by a strong sense of community and closeness, whereby teachers could rely on each other when needed. School-wide SEL initiatives taught elementary students about character strengths and virtues, while also establishing a shared purpose and goal to bring everyone together. Teachers at case study middle and high schools characterized the culture in ways that conveyed a more specialized, professional environment, while students discussed the challenge of building relationships with teachers within a small window of a few hours per week (i.e., block scheduling). Some school-wide SEL-related initiatives were present at case study middle and high schools, but participation appeared to be less comprehensive there than at elementary schools.

## What did case study schools look like?

Staff and students from six schools participated in focus group discussions about SEL implementation. Two elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools were selected. Five of six schools were classified as Title I (i.e., >60% of elementary students or >70% of secondary students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch).

### Elementary schools (n = 2)

Asian: 2%  
Black: 7%  
Hispanic: 79%  
Other: 2%  
White: 11%  
ECODIS: 83%  
EL: 34%  
SPED: 18%

### Middle schools (n = 2)

Asian: 2%  
Black: 6%  
Hispanic: 45%  
Other: 5%  
White: 44%  
ECODIS: 41%  
EL: 12%  
SPED: 15%

### High schools (n = 2)

Asian: 2%  
Black: 9%  
Hispanic: 85%  
Two or more: 1%  
White: 4%  
ECODIS: 82%  
EL: 34%  
SPED: 15%

*Note.* ECODIS = economically disadvantaged; EL = English learner; SPED = special education

Much of the closeness and familiarity at the elementary school level may be attributable to the structure of the school day, wherein teachers have ample time to build relationships with students. Elementary schools also have a smaller number of staff and students than do middle and high schools, further increasing a sense of connection and community when everyone recognizes each other. A larger staff and student body at the middle and high school levels, combined with block scheduling, contributes to a more fragmented, potentially isolating system in which staff and students are expected to feel safe and secure to build relationships with each other within small windows of opportunity. Many students at the middle school level discussed this challenge, while high school students consistently mentioned their appreciation for the care and support received from teachers.

## How did students and teachers talk about SEL at case study schools?

### Elementary Schools

Students and teachers at both elementary schools spoke positively about the school culture and relationships. Teachers described the sense of community as strong and trusting, while students largely described their favorite thing about school as their relationships with teachers and friends. Both schools had longstanding school-wide initiatives to promote and celebrate character strengths and virtues, and discussions about these initiatives illustrated an SEL language shared by staff and students alike. SEL lessons were incorporated into teachers' weekly lesson plans and occurred on the same day every week. Students also mentioned service clubs and leadership councils as positive experiences that strengthened their sense of self-efficacy, responsibility, and connection to the school community. Social circles were mentioned occasionally but did not appear to be ingrained into the school culture at either school.

With respect to **coordinated leadership**, teachers at both schools indicated that principals were supportive of SEL-related work and understood the importance of fostering trusting relationships as a means of improving school culture and community. To strengthen community and connection among staff, one principal created a pilot program for teachers to connect outside the classroom during the school day. This program not only strengthened the relationships between staff members but it also helped teachers feel more comfortable and encouraged to engage with students from other classes and grades. One teacher explained, "I knew so many students already because of connections I have with the teachers. I always felt very comfortable going into other classrooms. We don't have this guardedness. There is a sense that students are [everyone's]." Moreover, teachers liked the pilot because it was incorporated into the school day and the principal took responsibility for organizing substitutes. The principal's dedication of resources, time, and energy to this effort was a clear indication the principal believed healthy relationships and a positive school culture were necessary ingredients for thriving schools.

**"Service club is a really good opportunity for kids to show leadership. It's like an award but it's also a way to show leadership. It teaches you valuable life lessons." – Elementary school student**

At this same school, the **SEL facilitator** organized a 2-day summer workshop on facilitating community-building and restorative circles. The workshop began with a half-day devoted to the importance of the circle facilitator's role and the mindset needed to engage in the work authentically. According to the facilitator, the proper mindset requires breaking the habits and tendencies of teachers as holders of power and control over students. Circles require facilitators to be "individually responsive" to participants and to come from a place of authentic engagement, wherein one understands and embraces the importance of connection, community, safety, and trust as precursors to building relationships. Circle facilitators' authentic engagement also influences how students engage in the circle process; students are more likely to authentically engage in the circle process when they perceive the facilitator genuinely wants to know more about them.

Regarding the feasibility of regularly facilitating community-building circles with students, teachers were frustrated with the lack of time or opportunities to get to know their students. ("Our supervisor comes in and we have to be doing



the same thing as the teacher across the hall at the same time.... I don't do [circles] because I don't feel the liberty to say, 'Hey, let's do this!'" Those who had facilitated circles felt circles were a good opportunity to get to know students on a personal level. ("Finding the time and space to have everyone in a circle and not think about math or science, if we had the time and space, we would all be doing [circles].") Students talked about circles as a helpful way to express their feelings, get to know each other better, and strengthen trust between students and teachers, though they also said circles were not done regularly.

Staff from both schools discussed the **importance of self-care and cultivating one's own SEL skills**; however, teachers said there was rarely time to do so. One school held staff circles occasionally, with teachers explaining that "[s]taff circles are really beneficial.... It helps everyone vent and connect with each other. SEL is about self-care and we need to take better care of ourselves." The importance of self-care and cultivating adult SEL skills was echoed at the other elementary school, with teachers saying that adults need to "practice what you preach. If you're going to do [SEL lessons], then model it." Another said, "If you're not comfortable with yourself, how can you help others find that same comfort in themselves?" It should be noted that the AISD SEL strategic plan is currently focused on strengthening staff's SEL knowledge and competencies.

One school experienced **SEL specialist turnover** at the beginning of the school year. Teachers spoke positively about the former specialist and the capacity-building support the specialist provided in the form of modeling SEL lessons, training teachers how to conduct morning meetings, and providing feedback on SEL lessons. Teachers emphasized the importance of building trust with the SEL specialist, which they said increased the likelihood of asking for the SEL specialist's support in the future. Within the context of teachers feeling unable to devote time to self-care and personal SEL skill development, an SEL specialist's support in these areas could be an effective lever for strengthening SEL in the classroom.

**Insufficient organizational capacity** emerged as a significant barrier to effective SEL implementation at one elementary school. Teachers felt the school was inadequately staffed to meet the needs of students, a high number of whom were classified as special education students. Moreover, pursuant to AISD policy, this school had a part-time assistant principal and counselor, as well as a recently eliminated PSS position. Consequently, the principal shouldered much of the burden to support students who needed time outside the classroom. This sentiment was echoed at the other elementary school, where one teacher said, "The existing approach and practices for handling student trauma are not sustainable. We can't have the principal regularly devoting significant time to a few students, to acting as a babysitter." Moreover, the AISD [policy](#) prohibiting suspensions for students in prekindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade (except in very limited circumstances) was also discussed as a barrier to effectively meeting students' needs. In the absence of additional district resources and support for schools, teachers viewed the suspension prohibition as further restricting their ability to meet students' needs, much less focus on SEL skill development. Previous [research](#) on the suspension prohibition echoed a similar need for additional district and specialist support (Fayles, 2018).

Insufficient organizational capacity also appeared to hinder **parent and caregiver engagement**. The recent elimination of the PSS position at one school left teachers feeling unsupported and unequipped to provide the necessary outreach to reinforce academics and SEL at home. Speaking about the relatively young age of parents and caregivers and the need to provide them with resources to reinforce SEL at home, one teacher said, "We have children with babies, and they don't know what to do. They need some help." Teachers at the other elementary school echoed this sentiment, saying that parent and caregiver engagement was a barrier to effectively meeting students' needs, SEL or otherwise. One teacher said, "We should have meetings with parents. [Ask] do they have any doubts, questions, [or] feelings. That would help us move ahead a little more." Another teacher talked about the challenge of engaging with parents who, for a variety of reasons, do not attend school-related events: "If you schedule a meeting with them, they're the ones you probably already have a relationship with. The ones that don't come are the ones you never talk to." Based on the consistency of such feedback from teachers, it appears that parent and caregiver engagement remain a significant barrier to building community and reinforcing SEL skills outside the classroom.

Despite these challenges, teachers from both schools spoke positively about the sense of community, trust, safety, and connection at their school. One group exhibited pride in their ability to support one another when needed and in the principal's willingness to personally support students. One teacher recently transferred from another school where SEL was excluded from special areas (e.g., physical education, art, music); the teacher felt they could "finally teach again" due to the strong sense of community and schoolwide buy-in for SEL. Teacher accolades were mentioned as an effective method of providing recognition and reinforcing teachers' commitment to the school and students. Teachers at the other school spoke about their strong teamwork and sense of mutual respect within grade levels.

With respect to students, effective SEL implementation took the form of providing them with **opportunities to take on leadership roles, exhibit pro-social behavior, and collectively solve problems**. One school had a service club that created a "peace path" for students to use when they needed to calm down or feel better. The peace path had inspirational and encouraging signs hung from trees. Students at this school also formed an anti-bullying group and created skits about how to respond to bullying in a variety of situations. Furthermore, both schools had longstanding school-wide initiatives that recognized students for exhibiting character strengths or virtues. Students said these initiatives helped them set goals, develop self-efficacy and resilience, and act in pro-social ways.

## Middle Schools

Students and teachers at case study middle schools discussed a variety of topics about school culture and relationship building. Both schools used advisory periods as the primary opportunity for explicit SEL instruction, though advisory was only offered to 6<sup>th</sup>-grade students at one school. Mentoring programs and service projects were discussed as best practices for cultivating pro-social behavior; building relationships; and in some cases, giving back to the community and helping those in need. Students routinely discussed their relationships with friends and teachers as the best thing about school, though some students mentioned bullying and building relationships with teachers as challenges. Teachers at both schools characterized their experiences positively, indicating they felt supported, respected, and empowered by administration, though some were frustrated with the structure of advisory, the absence of additional district support, and inconsistent enforcement of student conduct rules.

With respect to **coordinated leadership**, teachers indicated that both schools had effective leadership in place. One school had a new principal who gave the SEL committee the power to plan advisory activities. This school had been supported by the same SEL specialist and facilitator for the past 6 years. The SEL specialist was described by the principal as "crucial" to the school's SEL success, as the specialist was trusted by teachers, knew the school's needs, and was responsive to those needs. The school's SEL facilitator was described as an SEL champion, organizing and leading SEL committee meetings, developing and distributing circle topics and other SEL-related activities for advisory periods, and leading school-wide service projects.

At the other middle school, leadership was perceived as "hands off" but responsive to teachers' needs. Teachers felt respected and empowered to adapt instruction to fit students' needs; however, SEL leadership was characterized as uncoordinated due to SEL facilitator turnover and sporadic engagement by the SEL specialist. These factors led to the characterization that there was "no consistency" in the way SEL was implemented during advisory.

Both schools had an expectation that SEL activities occur weekly during advisory. One school focused on building community by facilitating circles (with prompts provided by the SEL facilitator and specialist), teaching Second Step lessons (videos or handouts), or tailoring activities to focus on historical holidays (e.g., Veteran's Day). Teachers at

**"In the 3 years I've been here, [advisory] has been a real loss for the kids. When they were able to get the help they needed, when they were able to be with teachers who knew what was going on or with teachers who at least were invested in them. I don't think that's true for most of the upper-level teachers. I don't think they care. [Advisory is] something they have to deal with. I think that's a huge loss for the campus." – Middle school teacher**

this school discussed the positive impact of setting a clear expectation at the beginning of the school year that Friday advisory periods were for community building. In prior years, teachers had significant flexibility and autonomy to plan advisory periods, which resulted in less consistent SEL implementation and the perception of advisory as a “do-nothing” period. The current strategy of having the SEL committee create, organize, and share activity scripts was, in their view, helping to gain SEL buy-in from teachers and students.

Teachers at the other middle school voiced frustration with recent changes to the structure of advisory classes in response to a historically large 6<sup>th</sup>-grade class and an insufficient number of 6<sup>th</sup>-grade core teachers. Consequently, core teachers from across all grades were now tasked with teaching 6<sup>th</sup>-grade advisory classes, which teachers described as difficult due to the absence of an existing relationship and limited opportunities to connect with students outside advisory.

These middle schools took markedly different approaches to **staff SEL capacity building**. At one school, teachers appeared largely free to develop their own SEL lessons for advisory. The SEL facilitators, both of whom were counselors and new to the facilitator position, did not appear to have a significant role in ongoing SEL capacity building, though they were described as occasionally teaching SEL lessons during 7<sup>th</sup>- and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade study skills classes. Only one teacher indicated having received support from the SEL specialist. The other school, in contrast, was characterized by consistent, relevant capacity-building support from the SEL specialist and facilitator. One teacher described the strategy as “[the SEL specialist, facilitator, and committee] will provide every support for [teachers] to be successful.” As mentioned, advisory scripts were developed during SEL committee meetings and distributed to teachers, with the expectation that the script was a guide to help teachers connect with students; however, teachers were encouraged to adapt the script to better fit students’ needs. One teacher said that having the SEL facilitator share information on how to conduct a community-building circle was a positive factor in gaining their buy-in for SEL, as it provided them with a clear set of instructions, which eased their anxiety about discussing personal topics with students.

**“This is a unique school. What this school has is very special. Holding all these fine threads together takes balancing that isn’t always possible, but it can very easily be broken. What’s the district going to do to ensure that the success continues?”**  
– Middle school teacher

At the over-enrolled school, **inadequate organizational capacity** was discussed as a barrier to meeting students’ needs. As mentioned, the number of core subject teachers was insufficient to handle the current student body.

Teachers further explained that demographic changes had resulted in the loss of AVID and CIS services for at-risk students, which consequently increased the burden on teachers, counselors, and administrators to meet those students’ needs. Absent the study skills and social work support of these providers, the only structural support for at-risk students who broke conduct rules was administrative action (i.e., referral to the principal’s office), which teachers characterized as inconsistent and ineffective. Teachers felt that students were permitted to repeat the same behavior without repercussions, which led to feelings of helplessness and frustration. Teachers described the current process as an ineffective cycle that was better addressed by services provided by CIS, LSCs, or AVID.

Similarly, teachers from the other middle school discussed the challenge of teaching SEL lessons in advisory to students with whom they did not have an existing relationship. Some teachers also mentioned the ungraded nature of advisory classes as a barrier to SEL implementation, explaining that teachers had minimal incentive to consistently implement SEL lessons, and similarly, students had minimal incentive to actively participate. Addressing the feasibility of restructuring advisory periods so teachers and students have some prior relationship and have other built-in opportunities for connecting outside advisory may help increase buy-in.

The **culture** of both middle schools was characterized as caring and supportive. Administrators from both schools were supportive of SEL efforts and wanted to expand opportunities for building relationships and improving school climate.

One teacher described the faculty as “almost too caring,” compared with that teacher’s former school’s culture. Teachers from the over-enrolled school described the school as a “unique” and “special” place due to its diversity of people and curriculum, and the autonomy and respect teachers felt administration gave them. One teacher said that “[t]here’s always been a really good community of teachers [here]. I feel like there’s a real camaraderie. We’re all in the foxhole together.”

However, teachers and students at the over-enrolled school openly discussed the tension surrounding race and socioeconomic status as a challenge to improving school culture. One student discussed being taunted about skin color, while teachers discussed the rising prevalence of discussions about wealth and money, with students making judgments based on parents’ jobs and salaries. Some teachers talked about the accelerating enrollment of students of color from predominantly low-income households as a contributor to overcrowding. Discussions indicated that these students were underrepresented in pre-advanced placement (pre-AP) classes, while White, non-economically disadvantaged students were overrepresented. Attempting to address this unintentional segregation may help alleviate tension about racial and socioeconomic differences.

## High Schools

Advisory periods were discussed as the primary opportunity for SEL skill development at case study high schools, with social circles serving as the primary means through which students developed SEL skills and built relationships. Teachers discussed numerous barriers to SEL implementation during advisory, including (a) **competing demands for time and attention** (e.g., make-up work for other classes, mobile phone use); (b) **inadequate support from administrators, SEL facilitators, and SEL specialists**; (c) **insufficient accountability with respect to how advisory periods were used**; and (d) **a lack of cultural and developmental relevance of SEL curriculum**. Students said social circles were helpful for relationship building and learning how to talk about one’s feelings, though they indicated that advisory periods were viewed by some teachers and students as “free time,” often with little structure and low expectations. In addition, the SEL language observed at case study elementary and middle schools was less evident at high schools. In all, it appeared that organizational, logistical, and cultural barriers prevented consistent SEL-explicit instruction at case study high schools.

At both schools, **advisory class** emerged as an area for improvement with respect to SEL implementation. Teachers and students spoke of using advisory periods for SEL skill development and relationship building, though discussions consistently acknowledged that advisory was viewed by many as “free time,” in which students were expected to work quietly on homework, or more often, played on their phones. Teachers at both schools discussed a **general lack of respect for advisory periods**, such that it was acceptable for students to be removed by other teachers in order to complete make-up work for other classes. Teachers also indicated that the **absence of clear expectations and accountability** resulted in students frequently wandering the hallways, which created an additional burden on the school’s organizational capacity. Moreover, some teachers viewed advisory as distinctively different from instructional time. One teacher explained that advisory was “30 minutes a day that they take from us but don’t pay us for.” Such perceptions were clearly connected to the expectations of how much time and energy to invest in planning for advisory class. With these barriers in mind, administrators might consider **establishing an incentive system with clear expectations and feedback** (e.g., accolades for those who embody and champion SEL) in addition to consistent, relevant SEL capacity-building support as methods for encouraging more effective use of advisory periods.

Unsurprisingly, **insufficient organizational capacity** at case study high schools had a negative impact on teachers’ ability to implement SEL instruction with fidelity. In addition to the challenges posed by unclear expectations and minimal accountability for how advisory periods were used, SEL facilitators and committee members discussed the challenges posed by working on a large campus with sporadic inter-departmental communication. To address this barrier, SEL committee members discussed the **need to identify and leverage department-level SEL champions to help share information and gain buy-in across departments**. Similarly, teachers from both schools wanted to

better understand how teachers in special subject areas (e.g., art, music, theater, other crafts and trades) were able to consistently form strong bonds with students, and how to leverage and disseminate those methods to core subjects.

Teachers at both schools discussed the challenge of **inconsistent enforcement of student conduct rules** by school administration, which they said contributed to a “permissive” school culture wherein students faced little accountability for misconduct. Teachers explained that the lengthy process of writing up a referral was often not worth the effort because students quickly returned to the classroom and repeated the same behavior. The absence of effective policies and practices for addressing students’ misconduct appeared to be a significant barrier to relationship building and fostering a safe, respectful school culture. School staff may benefit from training in culturally responsive restorative practices (CRRP), a framework for building relationships and resolving conflict without the use of exclusionary discipline practices.

With respect to capacity building, teachers from both schools discussed the **need for additional SEL training and support**. As mentioned, sporadic inter-departmental communication served as a barrier to effectively disseminating SEL content. Teachers at one school felt frustrated that they still did not know what SEL was supposed to look like in the classroom. One teacher remarked that “whatever SEL is trying to do, it is not happening because of a lack of fidelity. People are doing things the wrong way because of ignorance.” Some teachers discussed the desire for more **practical techniques and methods for building relationships with students** during class time, as they felt overwhelmed with the number of competing demands for their time and attention and wanted someone to help provide clarity and focus to their SEL work. Teachers also made clear their **desire to observe exemplars of SEL classroom instruction**. (“It’s better to see it in action than have it described on paper.”)

Some teachers felt challenged by the task of facilitating circles with students with whom they did not have an existing relationship. Teachers who had relationships with their advisory students spoke of the power of watching students grow and the greater ease with which circles could be facilitated. More generally, some teachers did not feel comfortable facilitating circles because they did not feel sufficiently supported or have sufficient resources.

Teachers from both schools pointed out that **existing SEL curriculum was not culturally or developmentally relevant to their students**. One teacher explained that the SEL topic during the week of Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) was unrelated to the holiday, despite a student body that was majority Hispanic. Students echoed a similar sentiment that SEL topics were irrelevant, explaining that it would be better to connect SEL with topics such as college applications, life lessons, current events, budgeting, and time management. Exploring avenues for connecting SEL to these topics could foster stronger relationships while also having a positive impact on students after high school.

The SEL committee at one school, with support from the SEL specialist, organized and facilitated a series of SEL sessions for teachers, with topics ranging from practical strategies for SEL implementation to the neuroscience of adolescent brain development and learning. Teachers spoke positively about the sessions but reiterated that **it would be helpful to observe exemplary SEL implementation**, possibly in a format like the “AISD in 3” [videos](#) produced by staff from the AISD Communications Department. In addition, sessions occurred simultaneously due to logistical and organizational limitations at the school, which restricted teachers’ ability to attend multiple sessions. Teachers said it would be helpful to repeat the same format (i.e., short sessions with practical, relevant topics) with enough time to attend multiple sessions.

High school students consistently mentioned their **relationships with teachers and friends** as the best thing about school. Students were appreciative of teachers’ efforts to build relationships and support students’ growth and learning. Students said that teachers were encouraging and willing to cope with any student and that the onus was on the student to put in the effort to be successful. Students suggested **using advisory for peer mentoring across grade levels**, with older students helping younger students navigate the challenges of high school. This dynamic would serve three purposes: (a) **provide all students with the opportunity to get to know each other**, (b) **provide older students with**

**a clear purpose for advisory, and (c) provide younger students with insight and advice to succeed in high school.**

Students at both schools discussed the **challenge of fostering greater engagement and buy-in among their peers**. Other students, they said, got upset when teachers reproached them for failing to regularly attend class or complete homework. One student explained, “I used to think my chemistry teacher was really rude, but it was because of me. I didn’t come to school. I didn’t do the work. When I started doing my work, I noticed it wasn’t the teacher, it was me.” Teachers echoed a similar complaint about student engagement during advisory, saying there was “no buy-in from the students” and “students do not want to participate, but you can’t take their phones away because it isn’t a real class.” Such perceptions speak to larger issues related to school culture and leadership, and teachers at both schools described the leadership style as permissive and uncoordinated.

With respect to **school culture**, students offered suggestions for strengthening connection and community. In addition to peer mentoring during advisory, students mentioned scheduling speakers from diverse backgrounds to broaden perspectives and facilitate discussion about race and culture. Students also suggested organizing a “community day” at which people could share food, dress, and customs from their home culture. A student who had recently emigrated to the United States described how no effort was made by school administration to acknowledge her cultural heritage, despite significant effort devoted to acknowledging the school’s dominant culture. As noted, SEL curriculum was perceived by teachers and students as culturally irrelevant, further emphasizing the need to revise SEL curriculum in order to connect with students in meaningful ways.

## Conclusion

In focus groups and interviews, students and teachers consistently discussed their relationships as the best part of the AISD experience. Regardless of the contextual differences between schools, everyone desired human connection. Each of the best practices discussed in this paper fostered the necessary conditions for students and teachers to connect and develop SEL skills in a safe, trusting environment. Conversely, many of the barriers directly prevented an environment where students and teachers could safely connect and engage in SEL skill development. To briefly summarize the connections between the four themes:

- When a school’s organizational capacity was high, campus leadership was empowered to determine the vision, scope, and structure for SEL; to translate that vision into action; and to build on that vision over time. When organizational capacity was low, the vision for SEL was murkier, and leaders had more difficulty enacting and sustaining SEL work.
- With high organizational capacity and a clear vision for SEL, coordinated leadership involved consistent and sustained capacity-building support for teachers and other school staff, meaning that the SEL specialist and facilitators regularly provided staff learning opportunities and supported instruction with culturally and developmentally relevant curriculum.
- With high organizational capacity; a clear vision for SEL; and sustained, supportive, coordinated leadership who provided relevant materials, guidance, support, and feedback to teachers, SEL was more firmly ingrained into the school culture, and opportunities for SEL were more easily identified and leveraged. When capacity-building support was inconsistent or irrelevant, teachers were less likely to buy in and take advantage of SEL opportunities.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to build upon the best practices and to overcome the barriers that emerged from analysis of case study schools:

### Continue Developing Campus SEL Leaders

Strong, empowered SEL facilitators were discussed as key change agents for building SEL into the campus culture. Their leadership was crucial to building internal SEL capacity, especially at the middle and high school levels, where

teachers' subject specialization and fewer opportunities for teacher-student connection resulted in less consistent SEL implementation. Supporting the growth of campus SEL champions through continuous, relevant coaching and support by SEL specialists should empower them to effectively leverage opportunities for SEL implementation.

### **Enhanced Change Management Support**

Schools experienced substantial stress and disruption when there was turnover in campus leadership or elimination of resources for students. More responsive change management support from the district could minimize disruption to a schools' sense of organization, consistency, and agency. Moreover, the district should reconsider the current process of determining how schools qualify for third-party services and what happens when schools no longer qualify, as the elimination of services was discussed as a significant stressor on staff and students. If possible, the district should consider ways of enhancing internal school capacity when a school no longer qualifies for services like AVID or CIS.

### **Strengthen Parent, Caregiver, and Family Engagement**

Teachers and administrators consistently discussed the importance of connecting with parents, caregivers, and families as a reinforcing mechanism for SEL growth; however, they indicated that doing so was a significant challenge due to limited time and resources. PSSs were discussed as beneficial to increasing engagement, but some teachers indicated that their school no longer qualified for PSS services or that they were not aware of the work done by the PSS. At a minimum, schools need to identify and leverage opportunities to connect with students' families.

### **Culturally and Developmentally Relevant Evidence-Based SEL Curriculum**

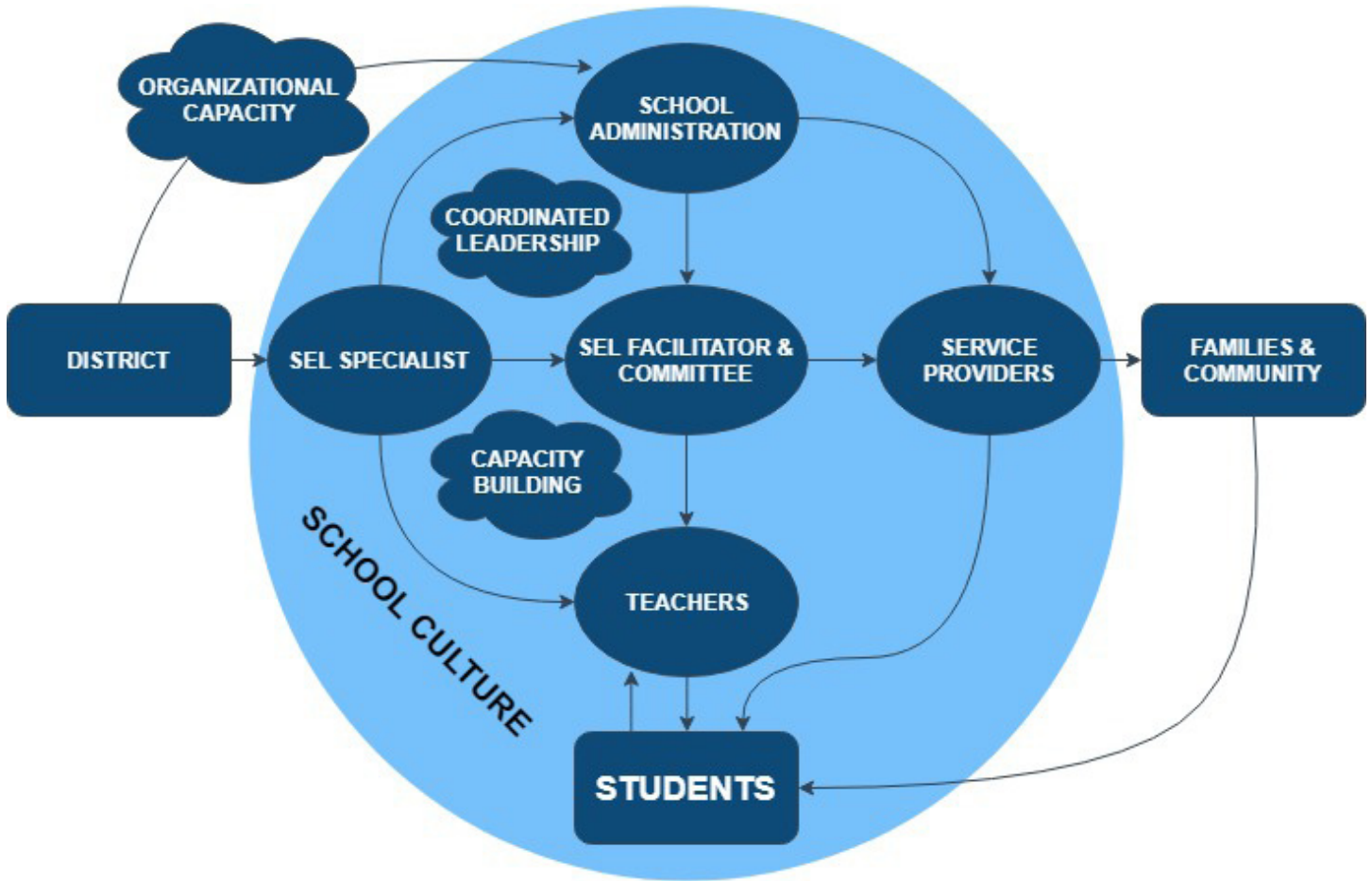
Evidence-based curriculum that speaks to students' cultural and developmental reality would encourage greater buy-in for SEL activities. High school focus group participants were emphatic that SEL content was frequently irrelevant to students' lives outside school. Coupling relevant SEL curriculum with frequent capacity building from SEL specialists and facilitators could empower teachers, especially at the high school level, to deliver SEL content in meaningful ways. Moreover, recruiting students to serve on the SEL committee would provide valuable insight on SEL curriculum relevance.

### **Advisory Class**

The structure and content of advisory class was widely discussed as a barrier to consistent, effective SEL implementation. SEL specialists and facilitators would benefit from working with school leaders to revise the structure of advisory classes, such that (a) advisory teachers would be more likely to have an existing relationship with their students, especially at the middle school level, and (b) teachers would be incentivized to use advisory classes to implement culturally and developmentally relevant SEL curriculum. As mentioned, greater buy-in could be achieved by providing teachers with more relevant content but also through school-wide or grade-wide SEL initiatives based on culturally and developmentally relevant goals. Additional involvement from administrators (possibly through regular participation in advisory SEL activities) could also increase buy-in and better instill SEL into school norms and expectations. Ideally, schools would have the capacity to develop an SEL course, possibly interwoven with study skills, as a means of increasing engagement, awareness, and fidelity of implementation.

# Appendix A

## School SEL Ecosystem



*Note.* Harmony in the school SEL ecosystem depends on consistent district support to ensure sufficient organizational capacity. The SEL facilitators, committee members, and administration, as campus SEL leaders, work with the SEL specialist to determine the vision, scope, and structure of SEL. SEL facilitators and specialists provide ongoing, relevant capacity-building support and learning opportunities for teachers to strengthen their SEL knowledge, skills, and abilities, thereby empowering teachers to build relationships with students and provide explicit SEL instruction. Service providers serve as an additional resource for schools to meet students’ and families’ needs, which further reinforces a school culture rooted in SEL.



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