

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

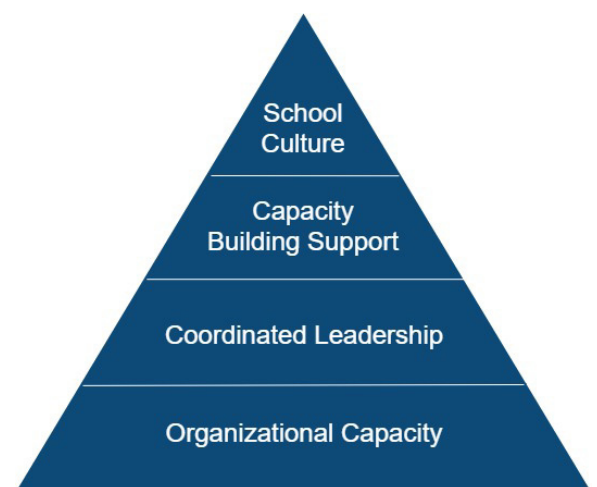
## Executive Summary

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** (Figure 1). These themes exist within a system of interconnected SEL-related processes (Figure 2) and build off each other to empower school leaders, teachers, and students to build SEL skills; strengthen relationships; and ultimately, improve 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.

Figure 1

Foundations of Campus SEL Implementation



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

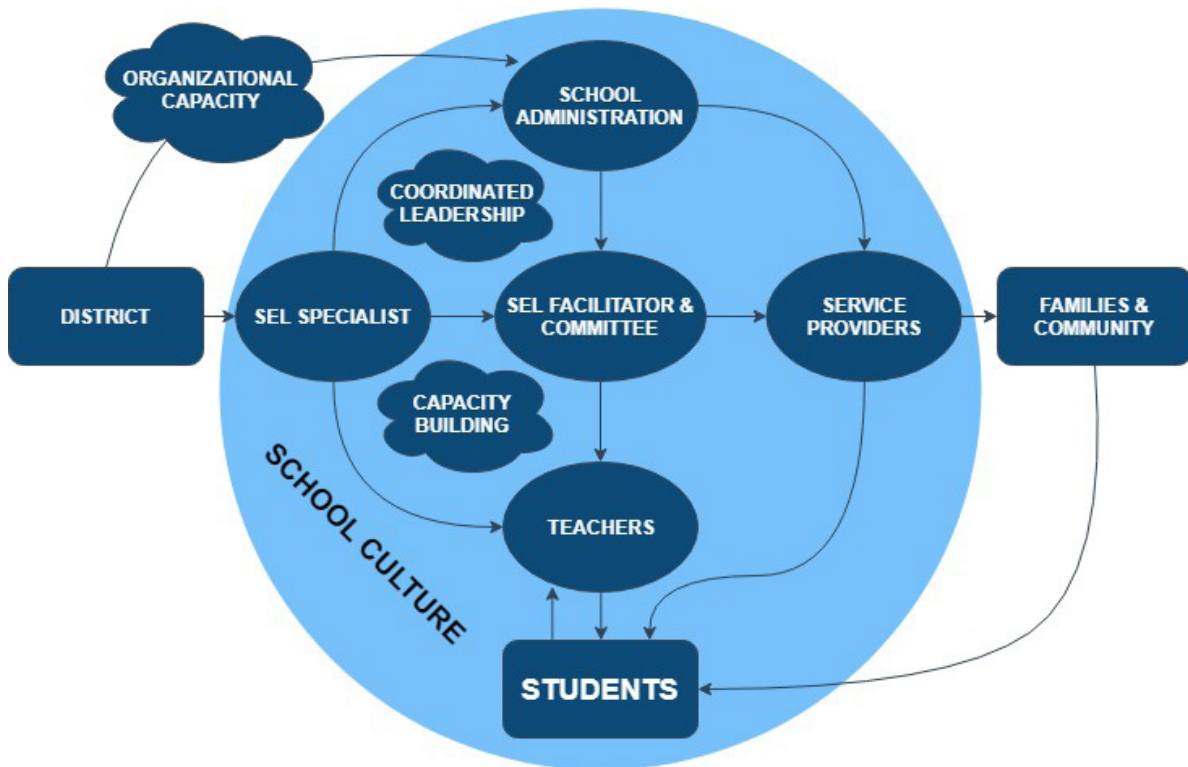


services (e.g., Communities in Schools), as these disruptions can cause significant stress to staff and students

- 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

Figure 2

### 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.