

# Needs-Driven Areas of Focus



**The charge of the national Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety** is to expand the knowledge and capacity of state and local education agencies (SEAs, LEAs) to integrate evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) and school safety programs and practices with academic learning.

The center uses an expansive definition of school safety that includes psychological and emotional safety and all of the ways that practitioners attend to school and classroom climate. We know that when children feel safe and supported, and when they know they are in the care of reliable, trustworthy adults, they are better able to take risks, stretch their learning, and achieve at higher levels. In short, they are positioned to achieve their greatest potential in education and all other aspects of their life.

To meet its charge and achieve its vision (see “The Center’s Vision”), the center has established a three-tiered approach

to providing technical assistance (TA), at no cost to the field. The general TA tier, conceived to serve the broadest audience, consists of a growing inventory of carefully curated online resources, including evidence-based professional learning opportunities, videos, tools, resources, and other publications. The targeted tier, intended to address common problems of practice for a small group of SEAs and/or LEAs, will consist of networks of practice and other learning groups as appropriate. Finally, the intensive tier will support the SEL and school safety needs of individual education agencies. This deep one-on-one consulting will focus on challenges that are relevant to other SEAs and LEAs. Lessons learned and new tools or approaches developed in the course of targeted or intensive TA will be shared and amplified as offerings in the general TA tier.

Equity is a key value for the center and central to our TA approach. The center recognizes that inequitable experiences lead to inequitable outcomes,

## THE CENTER’S

# VISION

When all children are educated in places of equity, safety, and learning, and when they receive the integrated academic, social, and emotional supports that meet their individual needs, then they can achieve their greatest potential in K-16 education, and in career and life.

and that attending to children's needs related to SEL, school safety, and school climate is fundamentally about providing equitable conditions for success. The center distinguishes equity from the concepts of diversity and inclusion. Whereas diversity refers to the range of attributes that distinguish people and inclusivity

refers to every person's ability to fully engage in and benefit from an experience, the concept of equity introduces the notion of where power resides in leadership and decision-making. The center believes that, in striving for equity, educators must take a strengths-based approach to engaging with students, parents, and the

community. When we keep equity at the center of this work, we acknowledge these stakeholders as valued leaders, partners, and contributors in any improvement effort and ensure that SEL and school safety programs and practices adopted for their particular school community reflect their values, history, and relationships.

---

## Five Focus Areas for the Center

Because many other thought-leading organizations and agencies are part of the SEL and school safety ecosystem, an important initial step for the center was to identify outstanding areas of need where it could add value rather than duplicate effort. Through a needs-sensing process that included interviews, surveys, and small-group conversations with staff from a few SEAs and LEAs, from the comprehensive center network, and from other organizations and agencies working in these areas, the center identified a number of clear needs. The most important and urgent among them fall into five areas of focus that will guide the center and its TA plan. Each area is described below.

### EQUITY

Support with infusing equity into the work of adopting SEL and school safety programs and practices was frequently and specifically called out as a high-priority need in our needs sensing. Respondents spoke variously of the need to ensure equity in learning environments, in access to supports, and in disciplinary practices. It was also apparent that, while educators are

concerned about and committed to equity in general, they have different understandings of what it means and looks like in practice. Thus, the center sees an opportunity to help educators develop a shared understanding of how to ensure that equity remains central to efforts related to SEL, school safety, and academic learning. While the concept of education equity warrants its own focus area, equity is also at the heart of the other four focus areas.

### INTEGRATION

Many SEA and LEA staff shared that they see SEL and school safety as new and distinct efforts, disconnected from academic learning. As a result, adopting new programs and practices in these areas can feel like a burden — like just one more responsibility added to educators' already numerous duties. This suggests a significant need for educators to understand the clear connections between SEL and school safety and academic outcomes. Additionally, the field is asking for more support in the integration of SEL and school safety efforts into the everyday work of educating children, including infusing them into academic teaching and learning (including curriculum, instructional approaches, and formative assessment) and into school and classroom climates for teaching and learning.

[continued >](#)

## ALIGNMENT AND COHERENCE

The center's needs sensing revealed that SEL and school safety can be misaligned with other whole-child initiatives or with related goals and policies set at the state, district, and school levels. The center sees an important opportunity to help the field clarify definitions, boundaries, and relationships among SEL, school safety, and other whole-child initiatives, such as school climate, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports approaches, trauma-informed practices, restorative practices, mental health, and even personalized learning and 21st-century skills. Additionally, SEAs have shared that they wish to collaborate more closely with other state-level child-serving agencies (such as health and mental health) in their state, with their own LEAs, and with other states. LEAs have shared that they wish to collaborate more effectively with local community-based organizations. Finally, we heard the field express a need for support with communicating about SEL and school safety in ways that are compelling and meaningful for diverse stakeholders, while still reflecting the core meanings of the terms. We believe that this need for strategic communication is foundational to addressing alignment and coherence needs.

## DATA-DRIVEN CYCLES OF IMPROVEMENT

Just as school systems commonly implement cycles of instructional improvement to support academic outcomes, educators are increasingly interested in understanding how measuring SEL, school climate, and school safety can be used in a formative way to improve the way students are served. Needs sensing revealed a significant equity component here because measuring SEL often relies on educator observation and interpretation of the resulting data. The equity-related risk is that, unless educators recognize and disrupt their own internal biases, they may conduct observations through their own cultural lens, which may result in them taking a deficit-based approach to serving children.

## SUSTAINABLE IMPLEMENTATION

Needs sensing also illuminated a need for effective and sustainable implementation of evidence-based programs and practices. SEL and school safety programs and practices have been linked to a variety of positive short- and long-term outcomes; yet, many practitioners find that their own use of such programs or practices does not yield the kind of significant results described in the evidence base. This may be due, in part, to inconsistent or ineffective implementation practices. Even among the highest quality evidence-based approaches to SEL or school safety, effective implementation plays a critical role in shaping outcomes and sustainability. For this focus area, the center sees an important opportunity to help practitioners balance fidelity of implementation with contextualization or localization for the distinct needs of their own communities.



WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit agency that conducts and applies research, develops evidence-based solutions, and provides services and resources in the realms of education, human development, and related fields, with the end goal of improving outcomes and ensuring equity for individuals from infancy through adulthood. For more information, visit [WestEd.org](https://www.wested.org).

© 2019 WestEd.

This document was prepared by the SEL Center at WestEd through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education under grant S424B180004. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.