The Evolution of Social-Emotional Learning in Washington, DC Public Schools:
A Short Roadmap

Introduction

Emerging from the pandemic, schools and families have raised a call to action: schools and their supporting partners must strengthen mental health supports for our children. For schools, this in part requires a stronger approach to social-emotional learning (SEL). SEL is, after all, an essential part of school culture and instruction that promotes problem-solving, conflict-resolution and self-management skills; SEL engages our youth in skill-building and fosters deeper social connections that can improve mental health and well-being.

Because of this call to action, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), in close partnership with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, DC Public Schools, and public charter schools, set out to understand the current state of SEL delivery across our public schools, and to develop a clear roadmap for strengthening that delivery. We developed a framework to understand schools' degree of SEL integration, including how schools use the guidance and resources provided by supportive agencies like OSSE, DCPS, the Public Charter School Board and community-based organizations. We then assessed a number of public schools against this framework, in order to understand our "current state" of SEL. Finally, we used the "current state" assessment to develop a set of recommendations for our schools on ways to strengthen SEL delivery.

The findings are designed to help school leaders, teachers, and SEL providers create learning environments that support students' SEL and cognitive development.

The core insight from our scan is that **all schools are on a journey from "isolated integration" of SEL practices, through "partial integration" to the transformational destination of "full integration."** Full integration of SEL policies and practices means they touch all aspects of a school, from classroom instruction to extra-curricular opportunities, to mental and behavioral health interventions, to discipline. Not all schools must achieve full integration of SEL, but all schools do need to move beyond the standalone efforts that define an isolated integration approach to achieve at least partial integration to support their students' current and future well-being.

We developed these insights over a period of six months through interviews, focus groups, and site visits with schools, stakeholders across government agencies, educators, and SEL providers, and students. We also leveraged publicly available reports, articles, and resources to identify national trends and best practices and child development frameworks that include socio-emotional skill building. The key takeaways from this scan are:

- A **framework** for schools to assess their SEL efforts and monitor their progress
- A **comprehensive list of state, district, and community resources** available for schools to achieve a full SEL integration approach
- The identification of **system strengths and gaps** to inform a set of recommendations to better support schools on their SEL integration journey

We know, as research shows, that SEL is important, particularly given students' post-pandemic outcomes. We must do everything we can to support students' socio-emotional well-being. Nationally,

districts are integrating policies and practices that support student well-being and the creation of supportive and equitable learning environments. In response to the pandemic, SEL support and guidance increased by 70%[1], and billions of dollars in state and federal funding were allocated to build districts' capacity to support student well-being[2]. The results of these investments are increased academic engagement[3], healthier school climates, skill development, improved mental health outcomes, and long-term post-secondary success[4]. To ensure the continued impact of SEL for DC students, we must first understand what support exists in our landscape and the pathways to deepen our efforts with equity and community building at the center.

SEL Integration Models

Our research revealed that schools' SEL integration can be characterized by one of three SEL integration models (*Isolated, Partial,* and *Full*).

SEL Integration Model Categories		
Isolated Integration	**Partial Integration**	**Full Integration**
SEL is integrated within just a few focus areas, often during discrete times of the day and separate from academics; school-wide systems and structures are largely not informed by SEL.	SEL is integrated through multiple aspects of the day, often teacher practices, academic curriculum, discipline, and MTSS; integration is grounded in a shared understanding of SEL across the staff.	SEL is integrated into every aspect of the student experience, and staff, students, and families have a shared vision for SEL that informs the integration.

It is important to note schools within the same SEL integration model can have different types of in-school offerings and practices.

We observed SEL integrated along a continuum of 7 focus areas: Instruction, Discipline, Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS)[5], Staff Support, Family & Community Engagement, Vision, Goals & Data, and Equity. Given the importance of equity, it is embedded within each focus area and its own separate focus area.

SEL Integration Model Continuum

Embed Equity in Focus Areas

Instruction → Discipline → MTSS → Staff Support → Family & Community Engagement → Vision, Goals, Data

Foundational for Partial and Full Integration   **Required for Full Integration**

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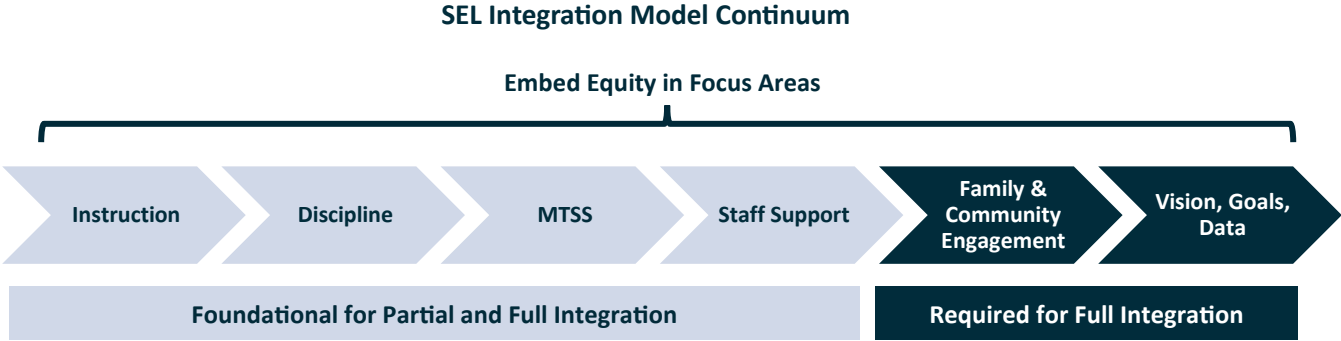
[1] How states are using ESSER funds to boost SEL and well-being in schools, K-12 Dive (2022)
[2] Social Emotional Learning Landscape Scorecard, Casel (2022)
[3] Summer Institute, DCPS Becoming (2023)
[4] The Case for Social Emotional Learning, CASEL (2023)
[5] MTSS is a system used by schools to track and provide tailored interventions for individual students to address academic, behavioral, attendance and SEL needs.

The degree to which schools are implementing SEL within these focus areas is dependent on which of the three models the school aligns with. To determine a school's alignment to a specific SEL integration model, we have developed the following integration rubric to assess where schools are on their journey from isolated to full integration.

Focus Area(s)	Measure of Integration		
	Beginning	**Intermediate**	**Advanced**
Instruction	Standalone SEL instruction in service to academic improvement and behavioral shifts	Integrated into some academic classes; SEL informed teaching practices, in service of skill-building	Integrated into all academic classes and teaching practices. In service of student and adult skill development
Discipline	Policies and practices are not aligned with SEL and some exclusionary practices used	Policies and practices aligned with SEL with limited exclusionary practices but more responsive than proactive practices	Policies and practices are not exclusionary and rooted in proactivity and skill building.
MTSS	SEL is not integrated into MTSS; no or limited wraparound supports	SEL is partially integrated in MTSS; some wraparound supports	SEL is fully integrated in MTSS and monitored; substantial wraparound supports; adult interrogation of the existing system of supports.
Staff Support	No or infrequent PD; no or limited adult SEL	Semi-regular PD; some efforts that focus on adult SEL	Consistent PD; comprehensive efforts that support adult SEL
Family & Community	Limited family and community partner engagement in SEL	Input from families collected; Community partnerships have partial alignment with SEL	Two-ways comms strategies to engage families in SEL; Aligned partnerships with community partners on SEL
Vision, Goals & Data	No established schoolwide vision and goals but may be some awareness; limited data collected	Schoolwide vision or shared understanding, but no established goals; some data collected	Schoolwide vision and goals established; Data collected and reviewed to make improvements
Equity	Equity is not intentionally prioritized across any focus area. Inequitable practices exist within 1 or more areas	Equity is prioritized in select focus areas; efforts are culturally sustaining but not asset-based	Intentionally integrates asset-based equity in all focus areas, policies, practices and partnerships
Measure of Integration by Focus Area Relationship to School Model			

- **Isolated Integration Model**: The school is 'Beginning' on a majority of focus areas (4 of 7)
- **Partial Integration Model**: The school is 'Intermediate' on a majority of focus areas (4 of 7)
- **Full Integration Model**: The school is 'Advanced' on almost all focus areas (5 of 7) and has no 'Beginning' focus areas

School Level Examples

Through our observations, we found bright spots across the District in the integration of SEL. Bancroft Elementary School and Ida B. Wells are two cases that provide strong examples of how SEL can be

integrated into MTSS and data collection as well as the power of a school-wide SEL vision. These approaches have demonstrated transformative outcomes for students and their families.

> To support the integration of SEL in MTSS, the wellness team at **Bancroft Elementary School** uses the data collected by an in-house SEL screener and Panorama (a well-being data collection platform that allows educators and staff to track SEL scores – attendance, behavior, and academic data – and inform interventions) to identify students requiring academic or behavioral support. To combat approaches to challenges that do not consider the whole child, the Wellness Team addresses the root cause of behavioral or academic issues, leveraging the trusted relationships they have developed with the student and their family and using the collected data to provide students and, if necessary, their families with the appropriate wrap-around supports.

> **Ida B. Wells's** SEL vision is led by the administration and supported by a team of SEL-specific roles. The entire school community is responsible for embracing the SEL vision, evident in explicit weekly instruction via the Peace of Mind curriculum, daily integrated SEL instruction, positive discipline practices and weekly SEL classroom push-ins by SEL Coordinators in coordination with classroom teachers, and equity and trauma informed MTSS intervention practices. This approach aims to teach and model SEL competencies sequentially by grade band, provide restorative opportunities to overcome challenges and limit exclusionary practices, and to create a safe and supportive learning environment. SEL data is collected primarily through the Panorama survey to inform improvements to the SEL strategy. CBO partners are critical providers of equity-centered offerings in-school and after school to bolster wellness and a fuller sense of belonging and ensure long term success.

DME Recommendations

Based on this research, the DME believes that, at a minimum, partial integration of SEL is achievable and desirable at every school in DC; full integration is an aspirational goal. The intended impact of this approach is to provide the necessary set of resources to sustain safe and supportive learning environments that students want to attend daily and feel loved, challenged, and prepared. To achieve city-wide SEL goals, the DME recommends addressing three major systemic gaps: 1) foster system-wide alignment, partnership, and knowledge sharing; 2) support schools to implement priority focus areas for partial and full integration models; and 3) collect city-wide data and pursue continuous improvement efforts.

1) Foster system-wide alignment, partnership, and knowledge sharing.

To break down silos and ensure coherence in our system, partner agencies should establish a citywide definition and vision for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). OSSE is already jump-starting this work by developing SEL state standards. Aligning the standards with these definitions could be a helpful approach, and would support schools' progression from an isolated SEL integration model. Additionally, as we improve our SEL landscape teacher preparation programs will be critical to sustain these new supportive classroom and school environments by better equipping incoming teachers with the skills to support integrated SEL delivery. Finally, creating a repository of SEL resources (e.g., tools, technical assistance providers, grants, etc.,) will support knowledge and best practice sharing among educators and schools.

2) Support schools to implement priority focus areas for partial and full integration models.

To strengthen SEL integration and ensure implementation fidelity schools in the newly SEL aligned system should receive targeted technical assistance for SEL-integrated instruction and staff development. This includes building teacher capacity, deepening restorative practices, and providing resources for schools with the highest need, determined by SEL model and select discipline measures alongside other SEL indicators.

3) Collect city-wide data and pursue continuous improvement efforts.

To support more robust and helpful data collection we should implement a citywide school climate survey to gather data on strengths and areas for improvement based on student, staff, and family surveys. This data can inform ongoing improvement efforts and provide insights into the impact of various SEL practices, competencies, approaches, and models used in DC schools.

Looking Ahead

This year, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education is committed to supporting OSSE in the development of SEL State Standards and a Citywide Climate and Culture Survey, emphasizing the findings from our site visits and encouraging the collaborative involvement of – teachers, school leaders, students, families, CBOs, and internal and external subject matter experts to ensure that every student has access to SEL resources and equity-driven practices, addressing the diverse needs of our student population. As we continue to translate these learnings into actionable strategies, our office remains committed to building relationships and advocating for evidence-based approaches to support learning environments that promote the well-being of students and staff.

Additional resources

A complete description of our review of DC's current state: The Social Emotional Landscape Scan

Find more information about OSSE's SEL Standards development here.

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) is responsible for developing and implementing the Mayor's vision for academic excellence and creating a high-quality education continuum from birth to 24 (from early childhood to K-12 to post-secondary and the workforce). The three major functions of the DME include: overseeing a District-wide education and workforce strategy; managing inter-agency and cross-sector coordination; providing oversight and support for education- and workforce-related city agencies.