



Demand for social and emotional learning (SEL) continues to rise across the country, as documented by surveys of teachers, principals, students, and employers. It is coming from school districts of all types – from large urban school districts that represent most of CASEL’s Collaborating Districts Initiative over the past several years, to suburban and private schools as well. Public school systems such as Evanston, Illinois (outside Chicago and home of Northwestern University), Hinsdale (outside Chicago), and Palo Alto, California (home of Stanford and the center of Silicon Valley), as well as private schools such as Holton Arms (outside Washington, DC) are embracing SEL, too.

Across all types of schools and districts, educators are realizing that SEL is key to preparing their students to be caring, thoughtful, and collaborative citizens in a more diverse world. Schools and districts are also seeing SEL as a way to address their particular needs, including helping create trauma-sensitive learning environments and helping students deal with college-prep pressure.

The four school districts featured below share several characteristics: legacies of academic success, increased levels of student and staff stress, and a leadership commitment to broaden their approach to educating the “whole child.”

“SEL initiatives too often are targeted to ‘those kids.’ The reality is that SEL has to be a Tier 1 initiative for ALL kids. Kids from all neighborhoods and all academic bands desperately need this.”

– *Keeth Matheny, teacher in the Austin, Tex., Independent School District and consultant*
[Referring to low-income students with low test scores and GPAs]



Evanston/Skokie School District 65, Illinois

“We are similar to many school districts that are nested in both urban and suburban settings. We have pressing, compelling, and important opportunities to address the healthy development of kids in places called schools,” says Superintendent Paul Goren, who also serves on CASEL’s board. The district serves about 8,000 students from PreK through Grade 8.

To that end, the district’s five-year strategic plan features SEL as one of its top priorities. “Happily and strikingly, during focus groups and surveys with the community, we heard a clarion call to address SEL,” he says. Not at the expense of academics, which remains a priority in a community where most students go on to college, but as an equal priority. And not in silos, but in conjunction with efforts to address race, equity, and restorative justice, among others.

Restorative justice practices have replaced more punitive disciplinary policies. In addition, over the past two-and-a-half years, more than 700 teachers (the vast majority of whom are white) have had “courageous conversations” on racial equity issues districtwide. Eventually, all 1,400 staff members will take part.

Culturally responsive practices are being embedded into the curriculum. “When kids see themselves in what they’re studying, especially in social studies and ELA, they engage more,” Goren says. District leaders are embracing the work of Zaretta Hammond in ensuring culturally relevant practices.

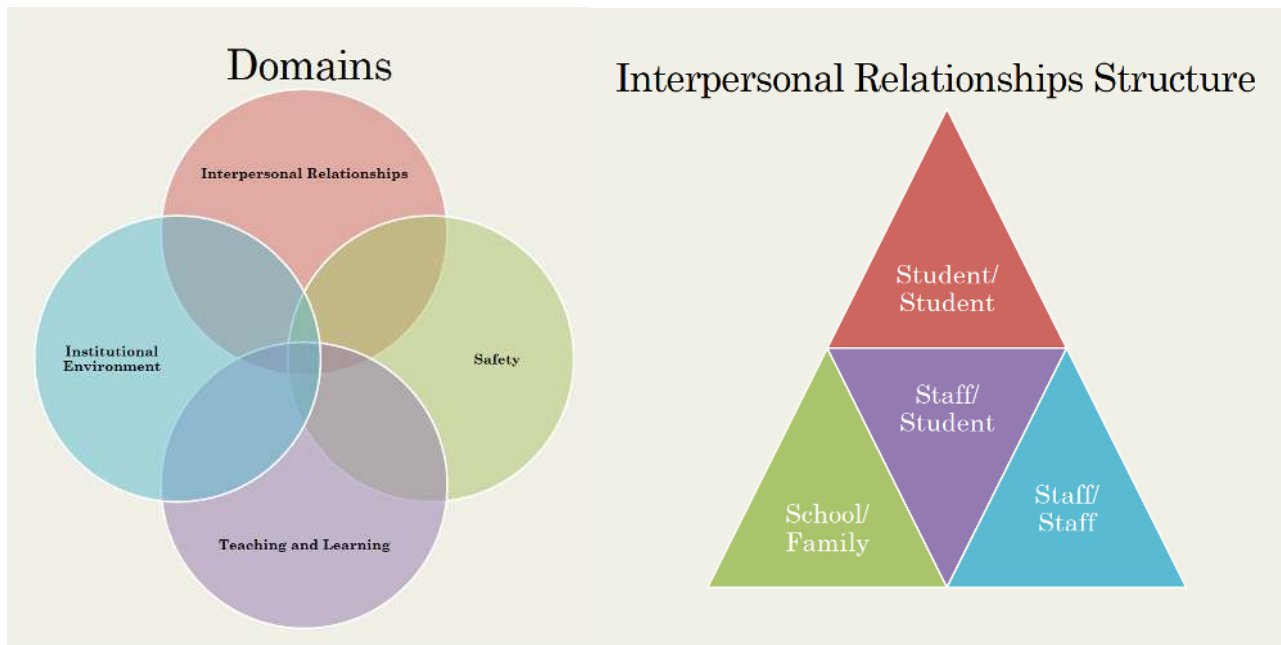
As elsewhere, a central challenge has been to find time to engage in adult SEL. “We’re trying to avoid having the work positioned as a trade-off — either academics or SEL — but to truly weave SEL into the school day,” Goren says.

Measuring impact remains a challenge, given the paucity of quality SEL performance assessments [an issue that CASEL’s multidisciplinary [Assessment Work Group](#) is addressing]. In the interim, Evanston/Skokie is using proxies such as suspension data and the number of students sent to the office, which have decreased.

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Goren says his primary contribution since being named superintendent in 2014 has been to “give permission” to staff to prioritize the work. “Lots of people really wanted to use practices such as restorative justice, but weren’t sure they had permission. Once I and my staff showed support, people were lined up outside my office — all embracing this focus. Now we can do the work together.”



Hinsdale District 86, Illinois

The suburban Chicago district is composed of two high schools. The schools have different student demographics, but both have embraced SEL. Hinsdale Central (about 2,800 students) includes some of the most affluent communities in Illinois. Hinsdale South High School (about 1,500 students) is more racially and economically diverse. Both schools are ranked in the top 20 high schools in the state of Illinois by *US News & World Report*.

Student Feedback: December 2016

"The Social Emotional work taught me how to connect my emotions. When I say my emotions out loud I realize what I'm doing. I eventually feel better because I realize what my emotions are. It helps me at home a lot too. It helps when I do homework & I'm really stressed. I can rate myself & know where I am & what I need." -Sophomore

"Teachers & administrators may say in passing to students to make sure to relax or take a "mental health" day, but in reality both the teachers & the student body tend to gloss over the necessity of caring & maintaining our mental health." - Senior

"[If I didn't have the SEL training] I probably would have gotten kicked out a lot & gotten more detentions. I think before I act now. The mood meter helped me with that." -Sophomore

The district embraced RULER as a central part of its five-year plan in 2016. The program, developed by Yale's Center for Emotional Intelligence's Marc Brackett, focuses on helping students recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate their emotions. "Having the Yale blessing carried lots of weight with our teachers, staff, and parents," says Brad Verthein, director of student services.

The district has been phasing in the program gradually, starting by ensuring adults have the common language and

SEL competencies to teach and model for their students. In the 2017-18 school year, all freshmen used RULER lessons in their physical education classes, while teachers began integrating some of the program's tools into their classroom instruction — using RULER's mood meter to help analyze *Romeo and Juliet*, for example. Instruction was extended to sophomores this school year, while schools also deepened coaching and other staff supports.

Verthein points to several positive, early signs: supportive teacher feedback, climate assessments, student involvement, and school board enthusiasm. In response to the growing number of neighboring districts and schools that are seeking his advice, he emphasizes the importance of taking time at the front end to build buy-in. "People want to jump to the WHAT and the HOW, but you need to talk about the WHY behind this," he says. "Go slow and make it stick."

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"You need to show how SEL will help us educators develop better students, better learners, better human beings. Show the research. Point to concrete stories. Make the case," he urges.

Holton Arms School, Bethesda, Maryland

The all-girls school in the Maryland suburbs of the nation's capital is one of the country's most acclaimed college-prep schools (grades 3-12), regularly sending graduates to top colleges and careers.

To a certain extent, the SEL work builds on the school's 117-year legacy. Its motto — "I will find a way—or make one" — reinforces SEL values such as problem-solving and resilience. Plus, the school's mission always has been to empower women as leaders — to "cultivate the unique potential of young women through the education not only of the mind, but of the soul and spirit."

But it's also a departure. "We've always embraced the mind, but now we're focused just as much on the soul and spirit. It's not either/or," says Nichole Foster-Hinds, the middle school

Portrait of a Graduate

Learn Well Live Well Lead Well

Mind

The Holton graduate is forward thinking while honoring tradition; she embraces lifelong learning with enthusiasm, tenacity of purpose, and intellectual curiosity.

Soul

The Holton graduate exemplifies strength of character and exercises moral courage; she values diversity of identity and thought, and believes that trust, respect, and empathy are the keys to building relationships.

Spirit

The Holton graduate finds joy in life and aspires to make a difference in a complex and changing world; when faced with challenges, she relies on her creativity and determination to find a way or make one.

director. School leaders say that for the past five years, since a self-study identified opportunities, they are now making the work more concrete and intentional.

As a result of that process, the school has articulated three

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— *Susanna Jones, School Head*

priorities that embrace SEL: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Health and Well-Being; and Global Competency. “These are completely connected under our umbrella of Learn Well. Live Well. Lead Well,” says school head Susanna Jones. “It’s important for us to stretch our students to understand the world beyond the ‘Holton bubble,’” she adds.

Palo Alto Unified School District, California

The school district, serving over 12,000 students in the heart of Silicon Valley, has a long history of supporting SEL-related work. Elementary schools included progress toward SEL skills on report cards. At the high school level, students were required to take a semester-long Living Skills class, a portion of which focused on self-knowledge, personal behavior, navigating healthy relationships, and life planning. “Providing instruction toward those indicators varied by school, with the differences widening and instruction waning as students progress through our system,” says Miriam Stevenson, the district’s director of student services.

In the past few years, the district has become more intentional about this work, partly prompted by a cluster of suicides in 2014-15 and California Healthy Kids survey data, which showed a need to improve students’ connectedness to teachers and to schools.

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— *Miriam Stevenson,
district’s director of student services*

The school has focused initially on training faculty, recognizing that adult SEL is so central to successful implementation with students. Some teachers — especially at the high school level — resist any incursions into “academic time.” Nonetheless, to date, about half of the schools’ 100 faculty members have been trained and are helping to turn the SEL-related priorities into grade-level, developmentally appropriate competencies. Student advisories have established rituals and routines for the girls to have difficult conversations about issues relating to them, such as ethnicity and race; gender and sexuality; and autonomy, independence, and self-advocacy.

A common language is helping adults and students understand the relevance and urgency of SEL in all aspects of school, including hiring practices. In addition, the school is rethinking its scheduling to better integrate SEL into the life of the school. “To take it to another level, SEL has to be central to how we’re ‘doing school,’” says Jones.

In response, the district convened a broad-based working group of stakeholders, which made 10 recommendations for improvement.

Elementary school report cards are being updated to reflect the latest research on SEL, and school leaders are developing a curriculum scope and sequence. “Our biggest challenges are getting more alignment among our 19 schools; having a common understanding of SEL what it is and why it matters; and having common outcomes for students across the three levels of our system,” says Stevenson. Many elementary schools are using Responsive Classroom, one of the programs positively reviewed by CASEL. Staff from the three middle schools are starting to collaborate on existing SEL instruction, looking for opportunities for expansion while seeking out professional development on SEL this year.

The two high schools are in the second year of working with a common research-based curriculum (School Connect), but have somewhat different approaches in their SEL delivery models. Gunn, which enrolls about 2,000, is starting from scratch to develop a comprehensive program that pairs students with a consistent staff mentor and cohort of students

Social Emotional Literacy and Functionality

HENRY M. GUNN HIGH SCHOOL

who travel through high school together. The work is being phased in one year at a time, starting with 9th grade last year and 10th grade this year. Key components of the four- to eight-week units include: team building; direct instruction, working with counselors to improve school culture, and regular check-ins for the students.

“Stronger relationships are at the center of everything,” says Courtney Carlomagno, SEL educational specialist. The cohorts normally meet during a portion of the school day called “Flex Time.” First introduced in 2015, the program gives students time within the school day to improve their well-being — such as seeking support from teachers, counselors, or mental health professionals; exercising; resting; or doing homework. Schedules during the year have also been revised to allow more time for SEL-related work.

Palo Alto High School, which also enrolls about 2,000 and is often cited as one of the top-performing high schools in the country, is building on its existing teacher advisory structure. The school is working to integrate explicit SEL-focused time and lessons into a long-standing program designed originally to support students with academic, college, and career planning. The school also is considering adjustments to the bell schedule to allow for more SEL time.

Across both high schools, administrators, counselors, and potential advisors are being trained. Community events,

parent nights, and leadership conversations are designed to bring everyone along. “We’re using professional development days to help staff personalize and become more vulnerable — to be authentic as a human being, not just as a teacher,” says Stevenson.

A key challenge, especially in the high schools, has been to convince teachers that time spent on SEL is not time taken from rigorous college-prep academics, but an evidence-based way to improve academic performance. “It is college and career-readiness skills *and* life skills,” says Stevenson.

District leaders say they are making progress, helped by strong support from parents (many of whom were initially skeptical) and consistent leadership from the top. “Leadership has been great in holding the line, repeatedly making the case, having lots of conversations, and confronting barriers,” says Stevenson. Carlomagno adds, “You can’t be afraid to make changes based on what’s working and what’s not,” pointing out that her school totally revamped its approach after the first semester, based on feedback from stakeholders.

“We want our staff to say that this is not something they have to do, but something they want to do. We remind them that this is why they went into education, to help shape lives,” says Stevenson.

RESOURCES

Evanston, District 65

- [Strategic Plan: Safe and Supportive School Climate](#)

Hinsdale, District 86

- [RULER website](#)
- [Introduction to RULER’s Mood Meter](#)
- [InspirED website](#)
- [School Board Presentation](#)
- [Five-Year Plan](#)

Holton Arms

- [Learn Well, Live Well, Lead Well priorities](#)
- [Faculty-staff presentation](#)

Palo Alto

- [SELF website](#)
- [Social-Emotional Learning Curriculum Committee website](#)
- [Social Emotional Learning Curriculum Committee Board Report](#)
- [Unit structure](#)
- [Unit themes for 9th and 10th grade, plus draft themes for 11th and 12th grade](#)
- [Tiers of support for our mentors](#)