



January 7, 2021

Dear Governor Newsom and State Legislators

As we continue to navigate the current crisis, California educators and our students need ongoing help and support. As teachers, we have witnessed our students experience intense stress, social isolation, and serious mental health issues. As you determine state budget priorities for the year, we can help inform the challenging decisions ahead as we all work to put our students' social and emotional well-being first.

Over the last nine months, we have seen both the pandemic and the reckoning with our racist systems take an enormous social and emotional toll on our students. For many students, the pandemic is compounding traumatic experiences with increased isolation and incidents of abuse or neglect. Parents throughout the state [have reported](#) their children experiencing higher than usual stress. With families experiencing wage or job loss, the financial impact has only exacerbated this stress. Teachers are already seeing what [researchers worry](#) will be a spike in suicide rates due to increases in youth depression and anxiety. Student stress is also evident in more D's and F's in [Los Angeles](#), the [San Francisco Bay Area](#), and throughout the state. We have seen significant disparities in the experiences of students and families based on race and economic status.

As teachers, we feel the weight of this crisis every day. We know that our connection with students can be a lifeline for many as they cope with trauma and the stress of our new normal. Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs [have shown to significantly improve](#) social emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance. We are teachers who strive to integrate SEL into our instruction even before this crisis, but to do this at a systems level takes investment from school, district, and state leadership. We must acknowledge the complication of putting students, the whole student, at the center of teaching and learning in a remote setting. We need your help.

As we consider the path forward, we cannot limit our understanding of what social-emotional learning is. [Transformative SEL](#) is a means to articulate the potential of social-emotional learning to mitigate the educational, social, and economic inequities that derive from the interrelated legacies of racialized cultural oppression in the United States and globally. Transformative SEL is known to raise achievement and change student lives well into adulthood. This is an investment in California's future. The imperative for this work predates this crisis and we cannot ignore the growing need to bring these practices to our students in a meaningful and culturally-responsive way.

We appreciate the investments you have directed thus far to help meet the needs of our schools during this crisis and we are encouraged that there will be more to come in the coming year. As you determine how the state will invest state or federal resources, you should send a clear signal that we are prioritizing children and our most marginalized students – students of color, low-income students, emergent bilingual students, and students with disabilities – by investing in social-emotional learning programs and practices. The state must not only invest in our children, but set clear expectations for how the funding should be used. To that end, we recommend:

- Utilize unrestricted funds, state and federal, to support and incentivize local leaders to creatively meet the needs of our students and put students at the center of learning and schools. Namely:
 - **Invest in training, development, and support for teachers focused on supporting students' emotional and mental health.** We appreciated the inclusion of social emotional learning and school climate as part of the Educator Workforce Investment Grant program, which was unfunded due to the COVID crisis. We recommend that future investments be larger and focus on teacher-led, integrated professional learning models.
 - **Set clear expectations for schools and LEAs for how to more effectively incorporate a focus on the social emotional needs of students,** including:
 - Ongoing, integrated, teacher-led professional learning
 - Accountability structures to ensure implementation
 - Paid time for collaboration and professional learning
- **Prioritize investment in LEAs that serve our neediest students, those who have struggled most with engagement through the COVID-19 crisis.**
- **Ensure that there is transparency and accountability not only for any new funds but also for all funds intended to increase or improve services for our neediest students,** as recommended by the [State Auditor](#) for LCFF supplemental and concentration funds.

We recognize the strain you are experiencing as you grapple with the enormity of this crisis and keep the Golden State intact. We urge you to ensure that our most precious constituency, our kids, are your top priority.

Sincerely,

Sarah Lillis
 Executive Director
 Teach Plus California
slillis@teachplus.org

Alyssa Avila
 7th Grade Teacher, Los Angeles Unified
 2020-21 Teach Plus Policy Fellow

Christina Johnson
 Chemistry Teacher, Los Angeles Unified
 2020-21 Teach Plus Policy Fellow

Thomas Courtney
 5th Grade Teacher, San Diego Unified
 2020-21 Teach Plus Senior Policy Fellow

Jenna Hewitt King
 English Teacher, Pleasanton Unified
 2020-21 Teach Plus Policy Fellow

Rina Gonzalez
 English Teacher, Hamilton Unified
 2020-21 Teach Plus Policy Fellow

Sarah Novicoff
 6th Grade Teacher, Alliance College Ready Public
 Schools
 2020-21 Teach Plus Policy Fellow