

As educators, like so many of our peers in California, we have been struggling with how we can best ensure our students are getting what they need during this time of uncertainty. As part of our work in the Teach Plus Policy Fellowship, we have been exploring issues related to Social Emotional Learning (SEL), which is of particular importance at this critical moment.

Educators in our working group of Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows represent large and small districts, as well as independent charters throughout the state, from Sacramento to San Diego. With more than 100 years of teaching experience among us, we teach students in elementary, middle, and high schools as general education teachers, special education teachers, English language development teachers, coordinators, and teacher leaders.

While the long-term effects of the pandemic on students and school communities are still undetermined, it is urgent that we respond to the needs of our students and provide guidance on thoughtful inclusion of SEL practices to districts as they respond to the crisis. In our research, we focused on the best ways to assess SEL proficiency at districts and school-sites. We created a rubric that school and district leaders can use to evaluate the implementation of the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), an effective lens for evaluating intentional SEL integration. We hope that by sharing this rubric and some simple lessons that we learned from our research, we can help district and school leaders respond to the social emotional needs of their school communities during this crisis. In this memo, we outline recommendations for schools and districts as they develop plans for supporting students in the short-term and in the longer-term, when we return to our schools.

Short-Term Recommendation: Respond to the Social Emotional Needs of the Entire School Community, Including Families and Educators

Everyone's life has been upended in some way and everyone in our school communities is being called upon to play an unfamiliar role. We must think about the social emotional needs not just of the students we serve but our families, educators, and staff. California has five Social Emotional Learning Guiding Principles: Adopt Whole Child Development as the Goal of Education, Commit to Equity, Build Capacity, Partner with Families and Communities, and Learn and Improve.¹ The era of distance learning provides a unique opportunity to embrace the third and fourth principles: Build Capacity and Partnering with Families. Building capacity means, "to cultivate resilience to adversity and build the foundation for social and emotional growth, ensure **every student and adult feels that they belong, have value, and have a network of caring peers to rely on**" (emphasis added). There are simple, concrete strategies for districts and schools to implement, which will support students, families, and educators while schools are closed. Districts, Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), and school-based administrators should:

- + **Encourage integration of intentional SEL practices in remote learning plans.** All districts and LEAs need to provide [resources](#)² and support for teachers as they move toward daily check-ins with students and create space for virtual [Community](#)³ [Circles](#)⁴ for students and staff, as well as [mindfulness practices](#).⁵
- + **Model SEL practices and provide parent workshops on related skills.** Parents' concerns should be at the forefront of responding to this crisis. This is an opportunity to create partnerships with families and communities that ensure their voices are heard as we move through the crisis and toward recovery. Administrators can integrate SEL practices into existing family engagement meetings, like School Site Council, English Language Advisory Council, or "Coffee with the Principal," and use community building prompts or activities (including virtual circles with parents). Parent workshops hosted by support staff can continue in a virtual setting with an emphasis on supporting well-being, mindfulness, and all forms of health.
- + **Improve staff connections and morale through staff wellness meetings.** The age of distance learning is an opportunity for administrators and educators to reset and restore negative staff relationships. For schools with positive staff relations, this is an opportunity to maintain and deepen bonds. All administrators should hold optional weekly wellness meetings with their staff beyond the faculty meeting. Administrators who are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with this type of work can bring in experienced staff members to co-facilitate or strengthen bonds with union chapter chairs by inviting them to co-facilitate.

In this stressful time, this work should not be treated as excessive. Administrators can start with easy prompts and inclusion activities for all meetings: share a single word that encapsulates their day or week, a number scale aligned to feelings, [share a rose, thorn, and bud](#)⁶, use [Yale's Mood Meter](#)⁷ and other tools. Opening and closing student, family, and staff meetings with connectedness and space for every individual will make the return to school easier and lays the groundwork for healthier school communities in the future.

Long-Term Recommendation: Integrate a Focus on the Whole Child and Commit to Equity and Improvement

With more than 10 million people applying for unemployment benefits in March, economists estimate that the unemployment rate is now at 10 percent, the same as at the peak of the Great Recession.⁸ California school districts responded to the previous economic downturn with drastic cuts in funding.⁹ We can only imagine how the impending economic downturn will affect our schools and communities. This should not prevent California from advancing a more intentional focus on the whole child. We believe that there are opportunities to leverage existing strengths to build the capacity of schools and educators to be more responsive to students' social and emotional needs. **We are offering the MTSS rubric created by the Teach Plus Fellows as an important new tool for schools and LEAs.**

This crisis has reinforced the critical need to focus on the development of the whole child and not just academic growth. We must capitalize on this moment to build capacity for individual teachers and schools who have resisted a shift toward including SEL and trauma-informed practices in their instructional plans. There are clear steps districts and LEAs can take to have longer-term improvement on their approach to SEL:

- + **Use the MTSS rubric created by the Teach Plus Fellows to self-evaluate, and identify strengths and areas for improvement.** A significant component of our work with Teach Plus this year has focused on developing a user-friendly [MTSS rubric](#) that supports districts and schools with fulfilling California's essential guidance on how schools can take a systems approach to promoting student academic, social, and emotional learning, physical well-being, and college, career, and civic life readiness. Our rubric serves as a self-assessment for schools and LEAs to use as they develop and refine their plans for integrating SEL into their instructional plans, both during school closures and in returning to schools. As the immediate crisis subsides, it is important to assess what schools and LEAs are already doing well and key areas for growth. District and school leaders should begin their process by assessing their own readiness to fulfill the state guidance on whole child development, and we hope our rubric can help with that process.
[Download the MTSS rubric here.](#)
- + **Create experience surveys for families and staff with a focus on SEL needs.** In addition to assessing the readiness of their own systems, districts and schools should gather data on the experiences of their students, families, staff, and educators to inform their SEL programming. The [LAUSD school experience survey](#)¹⁰ provides a model that collects data on SEL competencies for students. To make an experience survey even more useful, it should be expanded to include input from staff and parents.
- + **Implement SEL practices in school-based and district-led professional development (PD) for administrators to model these practices for staff.** Effective SEL practices require vulnerability from adults to create authentic communities. This should look like seamless integration, regardless of content, rather than treating SEL and trauma-informed practices as separate, stand-alone PD. Administrators should set a tone for the whole schools and districts to embrace. The manifestation of this will look different in each LEA and school but should represent a commitment to SEL practices.
- + **Amplify the voices of expert practitioners within your school or district.** Leverage your internal experts by creating mechanisms for them to share their expertise and resources, including site or classroom visits, and teacher-led professional learning. Assessing existing strengths, with a tool like the Teach Plus MTSS rubric will help you to identify such experts and model sites.

CONCLUSION

Social emotional learning is now more important than ever. We all must embrace this moment of connection and shared trauma to craft a vision for the world we want to exist after the crisis passes. We hope that state leaders, including Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond and Governor Gavin Newsom, make it a priority to support schools in effectively integrating SEL in their instruction during remote learning and the recovery even when faced with serious budget constraints. We are ready to collaborate and partner with district leadership and state legislators to ensure teacher voice is included during this pivotal time of transformation for our state and nation.

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ENDNOTES

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- ⁵ *Inner Explorer*. Accessed from: <https://innerexplorer.org/> on April 7, 2020.
- ⁶ Gonzalez, Argos. “A Mindful Way to Reflect: Rose, Thorn, and Bud,” *MindfulSchools.org*, May 24, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.mindfulschools.org/inspiration/mindful-reflection/> on April 13, 2020.
- ⁷ *Mood Meter*. Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. Retrieved from: <http://ei.yale.edu/mood-meter-overview/> on April 13, 2020.
- ⁸ Long, Heather. “Over 10 million Americans applied for unemployment benefits in March as economy collapsed,” *Washington Post*, April 2, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/04/02/jobless-march-coronavirus/> on April 3, 2020.
- ⁹ Klein, Alison. “Recession’s Toll on K-12 Budgets Both Wide and Deep,” *Education Week*, January 5, 2011. Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/01/13/16landscape.h30.html> on April 3, 2020.
- ¹⁰ *LAUSD SCHOOL EXPERIENCE SURVEY RESULTS 2019-20*. Los Angeles Unified School District. Retrieved from: <https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/16461> on April 3, 2020.