

# Preparing New Teachers for the Classroom: A Vision for Social and Emotional Learning in Indiana



# INTRODUCTION

As Teach Plus Indiana Teaching Policy Fellows, we are educators representing a wide variety of experiences, backgrounds, and settings across the state. Our students come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, educational settings (public and charter), and urban, rural and suburban areas. Our working group within the larger Fellowship cohort has spent the last year developing a deeper knowledge of the need and urgency for trauma-informed instruction and SEL in the classroom.

We are passionate educators who teach academic knowledge and skills while also guiding the development of our students' social skills, character, and relationships. The hope of any educator is to help develop their students into productive, responsible citizens who can build relationships, navigate careers, and contribute to communities. Unfortunately, this can be challenging as we see the impact of trauma on students firsthand and often do not feel equipped to help students navigate the difficult situations they face like unsafe home environments, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and more.

Trauma-informed instruction and training around social and emotional learning (SEL), for both pre-service and in-service teachers, ensures educators can support their students to meet these goals. Research shows that SEL training has a significant, positive correlation with student attendance, behavior, and improved academic performance for students of all backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> As advocates for teacher and student success, we believe we should begin with the educators who are the least-experienced and most likely to feel ill-equipped to handle student trauma. Teacher preparation programs need to train pre-service teachers in the implementation of SEL and trauma-informed instruction, not only supporting their future students' social and emotional needs but their own needs as well.

We conducted research to better understand and put forth recommendations on incorporating trauma-informed instruction and SEL concepts into Indiana's teacher preparation programs. In this brief, we present our findings and recommendations for teacher preparation programs and education leaders in Indiana.

## Findings

1. University faculty and administrators want to grow their programs through intentional SEL placement in their curriculum and educator training.
2. University faculty and administrators believe the requirements are unclear in regard to the inclusion of SEL training and trauma-informed instruction in teacher preparation programs, both in university accreditation and educator licensure.
3. The interpretation and training of aspiring teachers in social and emotional learning differ widely, and so does the universities' approach to its implementation.

## Recommendations

1. Educator preparation programs in Indiana should audit their curriculum to identify how SEL is currently being incorporated into their teacher training, specifically regarding the language in course descriptions or offerings.
2. In accordance with the requirements of HB1283, the Indiana Department of Education should provide specific training and/or curriculum on how to incorporate SEL competencies and trauma-informed instruction into educator preparation programs.
3. Educator preparation programs in Indiana should partner with and engage in SEL-focused conversations with Indiana K-12 school districts and teachers as a foundation of how SEL training should be implemented for their pre-service teaching candidates.

## CURRENT LEGISLATION IN INDIANA

Teach Plus Policy Fellows informed the creation of and advocated on behalf of House Bill 1283<sup>2</sup>, authored by Representative Dale DeVon, in the 2020 Indiana General Assembly. HB1283 passed and will now require teacher preparation programs to incorporate trauma-informed instruction into their curriculum for pre-service teachers, just as we hoped when our work as Fellows began. This legislation will ensure that future pre-service teachers in Indiana will be trained on how to recognize trauma and implement trauma-informed instruction, better preparing teachers for success. Our research and the resulting recommendations focus on the areas of improvement for teacher preparation programs as they begin to align and incorporate trauma-informed instruction into their curriculum in accordance with HB1283. Additionally, we have provided background research in this brief on the essential understandings of SEL and trauma-informed instruction as some of our readers may not yet be familiar with these concepts.

Soon after the passing of HB1283, educators, students, and parents were thrown into full-time remote learning because of COVID-19, and with this came further changes and challenges in learning environments. In this new landscape, SEL skills are all the more critical to help manage stress and anxiety of educators and students alike. SEL needs to be a priority during this national COVID-19 crisis and teacher preparation programs must ensure that SEL training is embedded in their curriculum to support teacher candidates learning, teaching, and connecting with students. We believe strongly that this same training needs to be made available to all educators, regardless of their years of experience or the needs of their student population as trauma can exist for anyone, anywhere.

## BACKGROUND RESEARCH: STUDENTS' SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS AND TRAUMA-INFORMED INSTRUCTION

In recent years, connections between trauma and children's brain development have come into greater focus. Research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and the effects of trauma on children's abilities to learn has resulted in reports like "A Nation At Hope," from The Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development<sup>3</sup> and "To Reach the Students, Teach the

Teachers” from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)<sup>4</sup>. Such reports emphasize the need to take into account students’ social, emotional, and academic needs and the importance of building adult expertise in child development, specifically in teacher preparation programs.

### **What is SEL?**

CASEL defines SEL as, “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”<sup>5</sup> To better equip children to face challenging tasks and problems in school and in life, CASEL has created a framework with specific competencies to help educators incorporate “intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive competence” alongside the traditional content they teach: Self-Awareness, Social Awareness, Relationships Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making. These competencies encourage what are regarded as important “soft skills” or “employability skills” like collaboration, problem-solving, empathy, and more. Influenced by CASEL, Dr. Lori Desautels and Dr. Brandie Oliver, in collaboration with the Indiana Department of Education, authored “Indiana Social-Emotional Learning Competencies”<sup>6</sup> adding Sensory-Integration and Mindset as two additional competencies. Through their research, Dr. Desautels and Dr. Oliver shared that educators are seeing an increasing number of students with varying degrees of trauma and adverse experiences which can impact their abilities to learn traditionally.

### **What is Trauma-Informed Instruction?**

Numerous publications speak to the lasting physical, mental, and emotional effects trauma can have on childrens’ well-being later in life. A study conducted in the 1990s used a questionnaire to measure the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) of several adults and found that the ACEs serve as possible causes for some health issues they faced<sup>7</sup>; these ACEs may include parent incarceration, divorce, abuse in the family, etc. In the Indiana SEL Competencies publication, Dr. Desautels & Dr. Oliver wrote that, “Students impacted by trauma or other life stressors may experience developmental delays that require additional emotional, behavioral, and cognitive supports.”<sup>8</sup> The good news is that this same research shows that recognizing the effects of trauma, building coping skills and resiliency, and positive relationships with adults can minimize some of the effects of ACEs.<sup>9</sup> This can be facilitated through trauma-informed instruction, meaning that educators consider the impact of trauma on students to guide how they instruct and discipline with patience and empathy. In Indiana, educators can help students to know, understand, and use the Indiana SEL competencies in their classrooms and their lives to manage trauma and future adverse situations.

To better understand the training and support teachers receive regarding social and emotional learning and to further existing research, including the work produced from Aspen and CASEL, Teach Plus has conducted a survey of hundreds of teachers across the country. In this national-level research, Teach Plus’ findings indicate that many teachers do not feel well-prepared to teach on day one when it comes to meeting the social and emotional learning needs of their students. Generally, teachers report that their schools and districts and not their teacher preparation programs are training them to support their students’ social and emotional needs and they are more likely to independently seek out resources to acquire the skills necessary to meet their students’ SEL needs than they are to receive this training from their teacher preparation program or school district.<sup>10</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

We began with a review of the existing research on social and emotional learning and followed with interviews with policymakers and university personnel across Indiana to discuss what essential SEL competencies to include in teacher preparation programs. Inspired by the findings of Aspen and CASEL reports, we researched the training on SEL and trauma-informed instruction pre-service teachers were receiving at teacher preparation programs across Indiana. We then conducted qualitative interviews consisting of ten questions with staff and administrators at teacher preparation programs at eight universities across the state. We used the qualitative data from the interviews to identify emerging themes and inform our findings. This brief highlights our findings from the interviews and presents recommendations for policymakers and university administrators to consider when developing a deeper understanding and better level of integration of SEL and trauma-informed instruction within their programs.

## FINDINGS

### 1. University faculty and administrators want to grow their programs through intentional SEL placement in their curriculum and educator training.

When asked how SEL and whole child wellness are being incorporated into the curriculum of their educator preparation program, one associate dean shared, *“We are not currently where we want to be but we want to grow. Nothing moves quickly, it's a long and slow process.”*<sup>11</sup> This university is in the middle of redesigning the undergrad education department at all levels (elementary, secondary, etc.) as a result of this desire to grow in their SEL curriculum. They are not alone. Other universities' staff stated that they're paying very close attention to national and state level decisions and will include more SEL. In addition, these programs have started to dialogue with professors and students around SEL. According to one professor, *“Teacher candidates have said they needed more SEL in their feedback from the professors and would like a seminar on SEL.”*<sup>12</sup> To reinforce this, an associate dean at another university said that *“we should start with the teachers (staff) first instead of applying it (SEL) on students first. It is a slow rollout process with slow integration and can take 3-5 years to be fully implemented with impact.”*<sup>13</sup>

While there are gaps and variations in implementation across universities and programs, there is a clear desire by multiple universities who want to see improved integration of SEL throughout K-12 teacher preparation, beyond a single course or add-on. The hope, according to many of our interviews, is that SEL is intentionally integrated throughout course offerings and is not a stand-alone credit course. Across all of the interviews that were conducted, participants named an explicit desire for SEL to be more intentionally integrated within their programs.

## 2. University faculty and administrators believe the requirements are unclear in regard to the inclusion of SEL training and trauma-informed instruction in teacher preparation programs, both in university accreditation and educator licensure.

During the interviews, we asked university faculty and administrators whether their teacher candidates are trained to recognize when a student is experiencing or reexperiencing a traumatic event. The majority of respondents highlighted this as a gap. *“There is not intentional training that is designed to show teacher candidates how to recognize when a student has experienced or is experiencing trauma,”* stated one professor.<sup>14</sup> University staff and administrators interviewed shared there was no formal training on SEL or trauma-informed instruction required in teacher preparation programs, except for a suicide prevention class instructing teachers on how to talk through the situation. According to one university administrator, *“their students are not specifically trained for such,”* comparing it with the analogy of *“how an excellent paramedic is trained to deal with a critical situation as a first responder,”* and affirming there was *“room for growth.”*<sup>15</sup> Some institutions have provided teacher candidates with opportunities to debrief about such challenges with professors during clinicals, although these offerings centered around early childhood and elementary education and not always on secondary education. In most cases, it was not required that student candidates engage in any of these offerings, so it was left to the student to decide whether they felt it was needed rather than it being an integral component of their training.

Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity surrounding the requirements for accreditation of university programs and the role that licensure plays in the required SEL curriculum for teacher preparation. According to professors at one college, who discussed curriculum and program requirements set forth by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), *“Diversity in placement drives some of the SEL work. Need to prove to CAEP that we are trying to diversify the teaching population.”*<sup>16</sup> They shared that there is some freedom in meeting those requirements and that the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) allows for homegrown initiatives and scholarships. One professor expressed, *“Both (accreditation and licensure) require self-reflection in practice within CAEP: they look for particular pieces like impact on student learning which requires our candidates to analyze and evaluate a teacher’s presence in the classroom (going beyond data); this helps them learn reflective practices.”*<sup>17</sup> Another professor stated that, *“accreditation drives what is taught but licensure is also important; licensure is state by state whereas accreditation is national.”*<sup>18</sup> Yet another university professor voiced, *“we are currently doing a number of things through coursework in our various licensure programs. In addition, we are in the midst of an innovation initiative to transform our licensure programs. Some of the planned innovations specifically attend to increasing and refocusing our attention to social-emotional learning and equity in new ways.”*<sup>19</sup>

When curriculum deemed necessary or required by either licensure or accreditation does not address the current need of its teacher candidates, universities should seek to address those needs through further training or coursework offerings. Prior to the passing of HB1283, such training was not strictly required for students entering the classroom from teacher preparation programs either through licensure or accreditation.

### 3. The interpretation and training of aspiring teachers in social and emotional learning differ widely, and so does the universities' approach to its implementation.

The third theme that permeated throughout the interviews was that while the universities are in agreement on the importance of SEL, and share a common desire for growth in incorporating it, there is a wide variation in how SEL exists in each of the different programs.

According to one assistant dean of education, their university has offered a few one-time, elective credit courses pertaining to teacher self-care, though only *"a total of 40 teacher candidates (4%) have taken these additional course opportunities."*<sup>20</sup> One of the offerings is part of an eight week elective course called *"Preparing for life as a teacher."* One professor from another university shared that, *"the interweaving of SEL into elementary occurs in 90-93% of the courses offered for students"* for elementary education, but expressed that the secondary education program relies *"more on the professors and their focus"* of SEL or lack thereof.<sup>21</sup> According to the department chair at a third university, SEL courses are intentionally incorporated across their curriculum in all four years for both elementary and secondary education majors; this same university offers an annual "Mental First Aid" training for its faculty, staff, and teacher candidates since it believes that SEL competencies should be reflected beyond its curricula in its people. Yet another university has nothing in place at this time, except the offering of an educational psychology course, though there is a recognition that there will need to be offerings in place that meet national and state requirements.

Findings are similar elsewhere. Either the universities had explicit curriculum, required classes, or electives pertaining to SEL, or have relied on the discretion of the professors to haphazardly incorporate SEL into their specific courses on their own, if having considered it at all. Most of the universities have identified SEL as being present in some form for candidates throughout their programs but few provided specifics that apply to all candidates, though this is certainly where they hope to improve.

However, the path towards full SEL integration is not linear, as many university officials recognized during the interviews. Truly successful SEL implementation means that faculty must be believers and practitioners of SEL in their craft. As stated by one professor reflecting on teaching a now fully-integrated SEL curriculum, it has *"been a slow roll out process, slow integration process."*<sup>22</sup> They felt, in hindsight, that if they had to go back, they would have started with introducing it to their staff instead of first applying it to their students. Implementing SEL integration effectively and with impact could take years, meaning universities may not be able to make radical changes in short order. It goes without saying that a pandemic could further slow things down. Yet, developing SEL skills in pre-service teachers begins with an organic environment that reflects what they need to learn most. Faculty who put into practice what they teach are more impactful, as pre-service teachers can see in real-time how SEL implementation should look and feel in their own classrooms.

Despite any discrepancy in current practices, it remains evident that the universities interviewed were in agreement that focusing on whole child wellness, via SEL integration, and not just a student's strong academic performance, was critical in K-12 education.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Educator preparation programs in Indiana should audit their curriculum to identify how SEL is currently being incorporated into their teacher training, specifically regarding the language in course descriptions or offerings.**

Many of the staff and administrators we spoke with expressed that SEL, where it was integrated, was most likely to be found within elementary education programs and not as much in the secondary programs. As a result, universities should strive to *first* inventory how they are incorporating SEL and trauma-informed components in their current programs and *next* find areas, such as secondary education, where they can increase their efforts in specific ways to best prepare pre-service teachers of all certification levels.

To help with this, educator preparation programs should strive to use specific language when identifying which of their course offerings integrate SEL competencies or components of trauma-informed instruction. For example, when reading a list of course offerings within an elementary or secondary education program, universities should make it evident that they are equipping pre-service teachers to help their students face challenging situations by adopting a Growth-Mindset (IN SEL competency: Mindset) or to learn the Zones of Regulation to recognize their current emotions (IN SEL competency: Regulation).

A specific example was taken from the Fall 2020 course catalog of one Indiana university available to its education students called, "Informed Trauma and Brain Instruction / Social and Emotional Learning." This course description uses specific ideas like trauma, trauma-informed instruction, social and emotional development, incorporating neuroscience and how it affects student development. Clearer language within a course listing means more evident placement of SEL practices into its curriculum, making its use and purpose more intentional within the pre-service teacher's development.

- 2. In accordance with the requirements of HB1283, the Indiana Department of Education should provide specific training and/or curriculum on how to incorporate SEL competencies and trauma-informed instruction into educator preparation programs.**

HB 1283's intent is for colleges and universities to include trauma-informed training for future teachers. Nevertheless, as made apparent from our interviews, educator preparation programs in Indiana's universities are at very different points in their understanding and integration of SEL and trauma-informed instruction in the curriculum they offer. It will take time for universities to begin the transition to fulfill the requirements set forth by HB1283. We believe it would help ease the transition to have an organization such as the Department of Education (IDOE) or the Commission for Higher Education assist Indiana universities in this process by providing curriculum options and/or training in how to begin. HB1283 lays out the requirements for the role of teacher preparation programs to support teacher candidates in SEL skills development and trauma-informed instruction. The IDOE already offers numerous training opportunities for educators currently serving Indiana's students through a variety of webinars and courses such as The Science of Happiness, Social-Emotional Learning 101, and a funded partnership with the department called Project AWARE.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the IDOE is available to train school districts in SEL Implementation. Further training is needed not only to train the pre-service teachers in their understanding of SEL and trauma-informed instruction, but how also to embed these topics into their everyday curriculum and instruction.

Universities would do well to train their professors on these topics first before extending those concepts to their pre-service teachers. University faculty need to be exposed to SEL training to support its further implementation into their curriculum. Support should be provided at the state level to universities in order to create a learning network for teacher development, which would create greater consistency in the understanding and integration of SEL and trauma-informed care across all Indiana universities. By ensuring adequate time and support towards SEL integration, universities are more likely to see their investment into SEL carry forward more efficiently.

### **3. Educator preparation programs in Indiana should partner with and engage in SEL-focused conversations with Indiana K-12 school districts and teachers as a foundation of how SEL training should be implemented for their pre-service teaching candidates.**

Many practicing educators have expressed that they had little to no training on SEL competencies or strategies prior to beginning their work in the teaching profession, but have since undergone training on the SEL competencies and trauma-informed instruction. This training has come through the school districts which employ them or through their own research and personal professional development. Since the introduction of the SEL and Behavioral Wellness competencies by the IDOE in September 2019, several K-12 districts have rolled out training and curriculum for both their educators and students regarding SEL competencies and trauma-informed instruction. Findings from our interviews showed there are gaps in implementation between universities, while there is a clear desire from teachers and professors to see its integration improved throughout all K-12 preparation programs. Universities could learn a lot about the training needs of current educators already in the classroom. Several universities we spoke with have already established partnerships with neighboring schools and/or community and mental health organizations, which would serve as a logical place to begin these conversations. Beyond that, the IDOE has listed several examples of “SEL in Action” at Indiana school districts that have rolled out SEL programs.<sup>24</sup>

Another effort Indiana universities can make is to place their teacher candidates with practicing teachers identified as highly-effective in their use of SEL competencies in their classroom. This will help strengthen teacher candidates' field experiences in general, and will specifically help them put the SEL training they have received into action. All teacher preparatory programs, in alignment with HB1283, should intentionally offer SEL coursework in addition to student teaching and K-12 field experiences, providing their pre-service teachers the opportunity to learn best practices for implementing SEL competencies and real-life strategies.

## CONCLUSION

Approaching the next school year with a trauma-informed lens will be crucial to ensuring that students and the newest teaching recruits feel safe and ready to continue learning. Future educators will need to be especially mindful of this as the COVID-19 experience is likely to have a lasting emotional impact on all. As we face an unprecedented future in education, teacher preparation programs need to implement HB1283 and ensure new educators are prepared to navigate through whatever challenges and difficulties lie ahead. We believe that we can best equip our newest cohort of educators to serve their students through robust and intentional training on SEL and trauma-informed instruction. This will directly impact the success and well-being of our children today who will, in turn, go on to be the next generation of educators, self-aware and empathetic to take on the challenges set before them.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>8</sup> See endnote 6.

<sup>9</sup> Overcoming adverse childhood experiences. (2018, May 21). *Mayo Clinic Health System: Speaking of Health*. Retrieved April 6, 2020, from <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/overcoming-adverse-childhood-experiences>

<sup>10</sup> Teach Plus Senior Teaching Research Fellows. (Forthcoming). *Survey of teachers on social and emotional learning preparation and support*. Washington, DC.

<sup>11</sup> Question: "How is SEL/whole child wellness being incorporated into curriculum for teacher prep in your institution?" Interview question (open response).

<sup>12</sup> See endnote 11.

<sup>13</sup> Question: "How did you get to this point in incorporating SEL into your teacher preparation curriculum? What steps did you take and obstacles did you overcome to get here (this point in your SEL implementation)?" Interview Question (open response).

<sup>14</sup> Question: "Are your teacher candidates trained to recognize when a student is experiencing or reexperiencing a traumatic event? If yes, what kind of training? Please explain." Interview question (open response).

<sup>15</sup> See endnote 14.

<sup>16</sup> Question: "What role does accreditation play in your SEL curriculum/programming? If it did not, what did motivate your SEL curriculum? " Interview question (open response).

<sup>17</sup> See endnote 16.

<sup>18</sup> See endnote 16.

<sup>19</sup> See endnote 11.

<sup>20</sup> Question: "How do your preservice teachers "walk the walk" daily when it comes to teaching SEL for students? Please provide specific examples, and how regularly this occurs." Interview question (open response).

<sup>21</sup> See endnote 11.

<sup>22</sup> See endnote 13.

<sup>23</sup> Indiana Department of Education. (2019, January 9). *Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Wellness*. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from <https://www.doe.in.gov/sebw>

<sup>24</sup> See endnote 23.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & STUDIES

The Aspen Institute: "A Nation at Hope" - <http://nationathope.org/report-from-the-nation/>

CASEL: To Reach the Students, Teach the Teachers" - [shorturl.at/orHY0](http://shorturl.at/orHY0)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Preventing ACEs: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/aces/fastfact.html>

Indiana State Department of Health on ACEs: <https://www.in.gov/isdh/28230.htm>

Indiana Department of Education on Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Wellness <https://www.doe.in.gov/sebw>

Trauma-Informed Care or Trauma-Informed Services? Trauma-Informed Care Project. <http://www.traumainformedcareproject.org/resources/SEC-NL-40019.ChildWelfareNL-Reprint.pdf>