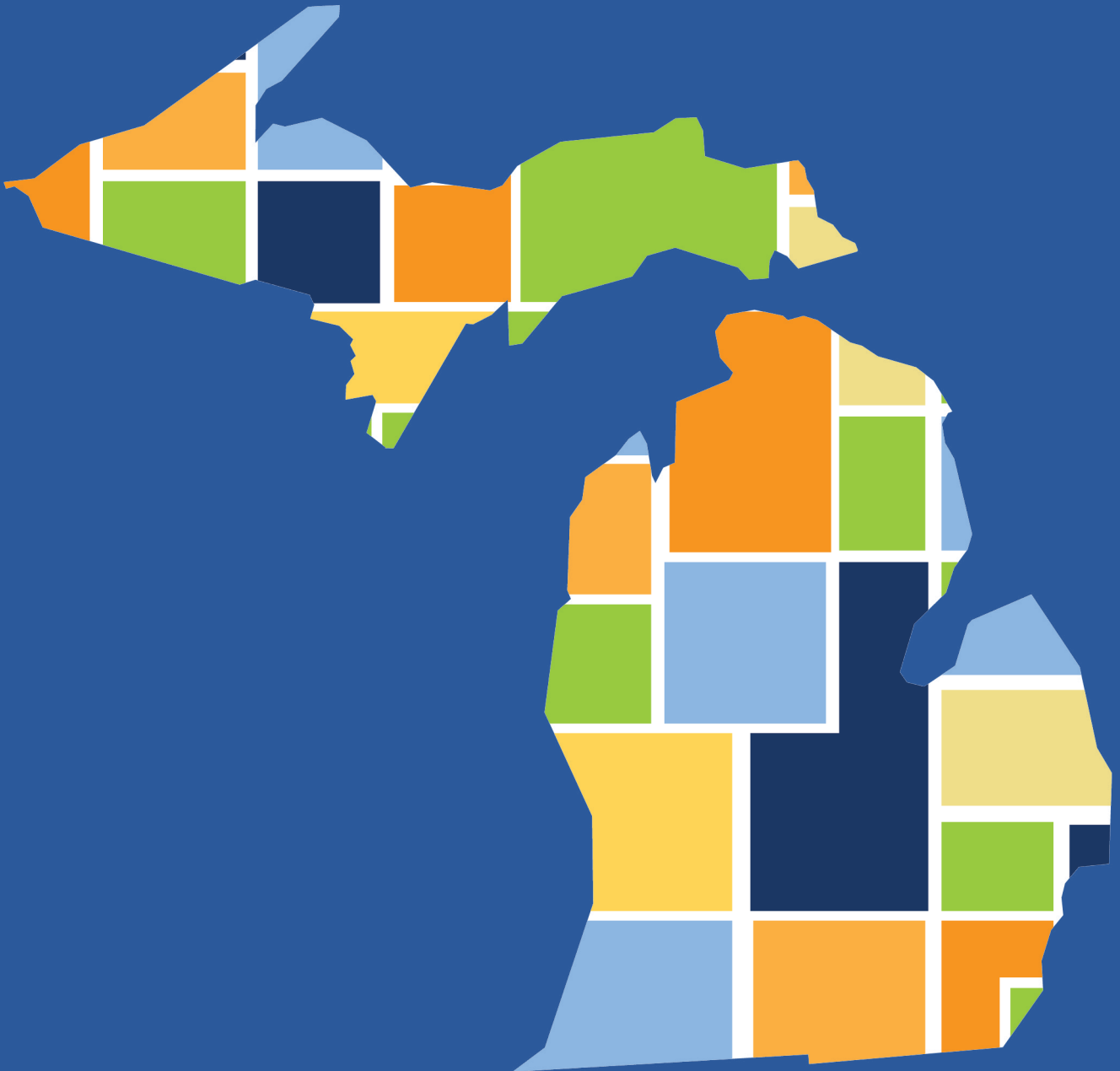


BUILDING EFFECTIVE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL INSTRUCTION IN MICHIGAN'S CLASSROOMS:

Recommendations from the Michigan Teacher Leadership Collaborative



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is both teacher-led and teacher-written. All authors are members of the Socio-Emotional Learning Work Group of the Michigan Teacher Leadership Collaborative 2022-23 Cohort. The findings and recommendations within this brief are solely the authors'.

The Michigan Teacher Leadership Collaborative (MTLC) is a highly selective leadership opportunity for outstanding Michigan teachers looking to share their expertise around equity-focused instructional practices, deepen their knowledge of education policy, and gain a voice in decisions that affect historically underserved students and the teaching profession. [The Education Trust-Midwest](#) and [Teach Plus](#) co-convene the MTLC.

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About The Education Trust-Midwest

The Education Trust-Midwest is the Michigan-based office of the national nonprofit, The Education Trust, that works to close opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect students of color and students from low-income families. As a nonpartisan, data-driven education policy, research and advocacy organization, we are focused first and foremost on doing what is right for Michigan children, working alongside partners to raise the quality of teaching and learning in our public schools. midwest.edtrust.org

About Teach Plus

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all. teachplus.org

INTRODUCTION

Social emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which students learn the social and emotional skills for success in their personal and academic lives. SEL researchers have identified five key competencies that support success: **self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making**.¹ When schools implement research-based SEL programs to help students develop these competencies, research shows stress and anxiety are reduced and academic outcomes improve.²

In 2017 the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) published guidance for schools to address SEL at all grade levels.³ The guidance is organized around the five SEL competencies and includes a list of benchmarks for each grade band.

We are a group of Michigan educators who are members of the Social Emotional Learning Working Group in the 2022-2023 cohort of the Michigan Teacher Leadership Collaborative (MTLC). We teach in diverse education contexts across the state and are interested in understanding and improving current SEL practices in secondary schools in Michigan. We are particularly interested in understanding the degree to which current SEL initiatives in schools are aligned to the five competencies and the guidance from the Michigan Department of Education.

We believe that effective SEL instruction can help address two key issues facing our schools currently: the student mental health crisis and staffing shortages. Both of these issues are complex and ongoing and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges are well documented in the Institute of Education Sciences Report on the Condition of Education 2023.⁴

To better understand if and how MDE's SEL Competencies are being implemented in schools, we conducted several focus groups consisting of secondary teachers from across Michigan. The following report includes our findings and recommendations for policymakers to make SEL instruction more clear and accessible to Michigan educators. We hope that the Michigan Department of Education and Michigan legislature use our findings and recommendations to help guide SEL implementation within Michigan schools as we believe that strong SEL instruction can help to address some of the biggest challenges facing Michigan schools.

Findings

- 1. Schools are implementing many different programs that address student behavior (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), restorative practices), character traits, healthy relationships, and mental health. Educators lack clarity about which of these programs address the five SEL competencies recommended by MDE.**
- 2. Teachers believe that SEL is important and should be prioritized, but they are unsure of how to balance SEL with the many other priorities in schools.**
- 3. There is not a clear consensus among educators about whether SEL should be incorporated into academic courses or addressed in a separate class.**

Recommendations

- 1. Schools should use the five SEL competencies to help prioritize initiatives, align programs, and make best use of personnel and resources.**
- 2. The Michigan Department of Education should provide stronger leadership to support schools in implementing effective SEL programs.**

METHODOLOGY

We conducted focus groups with Michigan teachers in April 2023. We recruited participants through email. A total of 21 teachers from across the state participated, 11 of whom taught at Title I schools. Participants were asked to read over the Michigan Department of Education's SEL Competencies, fill out a questionnaire, and then expound on their responses in discussions that addressed the following research questions:

- + What are secondary schools in MI doing to address SEL?
- + To what extent are SEL initiatives aligned to the five competencies in the MDE guidance?
- + How can SEL implementation in schools be more effective?

After conducting the focus groups, we coded participant responses in order to identify themes. We were able to sort participant responses into three main categories: importance of SEL, how SEL should be implemented in schools and why, and challenges and concerns with SEL implementation.

FINDINGS

- 1. Schools are implementing many different programs that address student behavior (PBIS, MTSS, restorative practices), character traits, healthy relationships, and mental health. Educators lack clarity about which of these programs address the five SEL competencies recommended by MDE.**

We began the focus group by asking “What is your school doing to support students' social and emotional learning?” Participants described many different programs and initiatives, but very few, if any of these were explicitly or exclusively addressing SEL. Many participating teachers shared that their schools were currently focusing mostly on implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS) and/or restorative practices. A few schools had explicit character education programs or were explicitly teaching positive behaviors and character traits in a seminar class.

Participants also discussed an increased focus on student mental health supports since the pandemic, but these initiatives tended to target students with mental health issues rather than the entire student body. The participating teachers viewed these different initiatives as somewhat supporting students' SEL, but many recognized that SEL was secondary to other goals (academic achievement, character development, positive school behavior, etc.) within these programs.

While in focus groups, after participants described how their schools were currently supporting students' SEL, we showed a brief overview of the five SEL competencies from the MDE guidance. We were surprised to find that none of the participants were well acquainted with the SEL competencies and indicators, and most were not even aware that the guidance existed. The participants expressed that the SEL competency descriptions made sense based on their understanding of SEL and they felt that some

of the competencies were addressed in programs at their school. It was clear that as a whole, the participants lacked a clear understanding of the competencies, and that their schools were not explicitly connecting the behavioral programs and initiatives to the MDE guidance.

2. Teachers believe that SEL is important and should be prioritized, but they are unsure of how to balance SEL with the many other priorities in schools.

During the focus groups, none of the participating teachers expressed the belief that SEL was unimportant or should not be addressed in schools. The participants seemed to start from a common understanding that SEL is necessary. One teacher stated, *“I truly believe that SEL should be in anything and everything that we do.”*⁵ Another teacher said that schools should take a *“Tier 1 approach”* to SEL, which means that it is foundational to supporting positive behaviors. Other ways that participants expressed the importance of SEL were in references to SEL teaching students to be “good humans” or that SEL is just what “good teaching” looks like. Participants often connected SEL to developing positive relationships with students and establishing healthy classroom communities. Taken together, these statements show strong support among participants for addressing SEL in schools.

However, a few participants expressed that not all teachers in their building agree that SEL should be addressed in schools. One teacher said, *“A portion of our staff keeps holding us back”*⁶ from implementing SEL initiatives. Other participants voiced the concern that regardless of what SEL initiatives their schools implemented, some of their colleagues would decide not to comply. The main reason that they ascribed to their colleagues’ resistance was that some teachers feel that they should not be responsible for teaching outside of their academic content area either because it is wasting academic time or because they are professionally unprepared to do so. One participant said that *“A lot of teachers are hesitant [to teach SEL] because they feel like they aren’t trained enough.”*⁷

Additionally, teachers expressed feeling overwhelmed by trying to meet all of the expectations placed on them and felt that SEL would not be given the priority it deserves unless other expectations are eliminated. Even though the participants strongly supported the idea that SEL should be addressed in schools, they expressed concerns about how to balance SEL with all of the other priorities in schools. Some of these competing priorities were other behavioral programs such as MTSS, PBIS, and restorative practices. However, participants also shared concern over balancing SEL with responsibilities such as academic content, teacher evaluations, grading, and preparing for classes.

Many of the teachers expressed that there wasn’t time during the school day to address SEL and that something else needs to be removed in order to do so. One teacher said, *“To me the biggest thing is time. We are all trying to fit a million things into a 7 hour day. So, how do you do that?”*⁸ Another teacher echoed that idea saying *“Something has to be rearranged in the day if we are going to address SEL.”*⁹

In many focus groups, the discussion of SEL implementation veered into the issue of teacher burnout. Many participants expressed the concern that they and their colleagues are stressed about many issues related to school safety and students’ wellbeing. One summarized it this way: *“Our job is not to be an armed guard or therapist or feed the kids. There are all these other things. At some point, what else can you ask of us [teachers]? I am 13 years in and I know I won’t make it 30 years. I almost left the classroom last year. This job is not sustainable.”*¹⁰

3. There is not a clear consensus among educators about whether SEL should be incorporated into academic courses or addressed in a separate class.

During the focus groups we asked participants, “How do you feel SEL implementation can be best integrated into the school day? Should it occur during regular instructional time or be a separate class?” Teachers shared pros and cons of each approach, but overall the majority of teachers felt that SEL is more authentic for students when it is integrated into regular academic classes. Teachers expressed this view with statements such as, “*The best opportunity for SEL is in the moment*” and “*SEL should be a part of every day. It has to become a part of the way of being of the school.*” One teacher described it this way:

“I’ve had better luck with when SEL has been embedded within the day’s lesson so that I can kind of put it into place. Sometimes there’s just a teachable moment that falls into your lap that goes with it sometimes within a monthly theme. But then you also have to have that flexibility of saying like ‘this isn’t really going to land right with kids right now. I need to wait.’ From the experiences I’ve had when you [separate SEL into a separate class] kids tend to feel like oh, this is just optional. I don’t really need to learn about this.”¹¹

However, many participants expressed the concern that SEL could get lost in all of the other priorities of academic classes and that some teachers will choose not to address it at all. Some participants felt like the only way to make sure that all students receive SEL support is by addressing it in a separate course. A few participants also expressed the viewpoint that separating SEL instruction into a separate course helps to emphasize its priority and make it more explicit for students. However, other participants expressed the concern that students do not take SEL seriously when it is addressed in a separate class. A few participants shared that their school has had difficulty getting students to attend seminar periods or participate in activities. Finally, multiple participants shared that their colleagues are resistant to developing separate seminar classes because it feels like adding another course to plan to their plate. One teacher summarized these tensions well:

“It’s a balancing act. If it is putting SEL into the curriculum, then you’re taking up my [instructional] time. I’ve got other stuff I need to teach. But then, if I’m putting into a seminar, I’m creating another prep for teachers. And so we haven’t found the solution.”¹²

So, while most participating teachers seemed to agree that SEL is more authentic when it is integrated in the regular academic courses, they also saw valid reasons for addressing it in a separate class. The participants seemed to be suggesting that the decision of how to effectively implement SEL instruction is best made locally based on the context of the school. The lack of a clear consensus among participants about how to best incorporate SEL into the school day is also not surprising given the other findings about the lack of clarity of the goals of SEL compared to other behavioral initiatives and the difficulty of fitting in SEL among so many other priorities in schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Schools should use the [five SEL competencies](#) to help prioritize initiatives, align programs, and make best use of personnel and resources.

- + Leaders and teachers should participate in ongoing, substantive, interactive professional development.
- + Administrators need to clearly communicate the goals around SEL initiatives and how they are distinct, but related to other initiatives. They also need to recognize that in order to prioritize SEL, they will have to give up something else.
- + The competencies provide common language that can help align all stakeholders.
- + District leaders need to understand that teachers feel conflicted about whether SEL is best addressed in the academic courses or in a separate class. Leaders either need to make a clear decision and explain their rationale to their staff or engage their staff in a conversation about this issue to increase buy-in. When a seminar/advisory becomes an extra prep, then teachers want extra compensation and some may feel like they are being asked to teach outside of their content area.

2. The Michigan Department of Education should provide stronger leadership to support schools in implementing effective SEL programs.

- + MDE released [The Early Childhood-Grade 12 Social and Emotional Learning Competencies and Indicators](#), but few educators are aware that this guidance exists. MDE needs to better publicize this resource and provide more supports to help schools implement it.
- + MDE should provide a menu of research-based SEL programs available to schools that are aligned to the [The Early Childhood-Grade 12 Social and Emotional Learning Competencies and Indicators](#).

CONCLUSION

Students and teachers across Michigan are struggling post-pandemic. Effective implementation of SEL in Michigan schools has the potential to address the student mental health crisis by equipping students with the tools that they need to be successful in school and in life. While many teachers believe that strong SEL instruction in schools will only benefit school communities, the task of providing it can feel overwhelming.

We believe that centering the work on the five SEL competencies [outlined by the MDE](#) and providing stronger, ongoing support to schools when it comes to implementing SEL effectively would provide administrators and teachers with the much-needed pathways to implement research-based, competency-aligned SEL programs within their schools.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Michigan Department of Education (2017). SEL Competencies and Indicators. https://www.michigan.gov/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/2018/04/12/SEL_Competencies-ADA_Compliant_FINAL.pdf
- 2 What Does the Research Say? (n.d.). Casel. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-does-the-research-say/>
- 3 Michigan Department of Education (2017). SEL Competencies and Indicators. https://www.michigan.gov/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/2018/04/12/SEL_Competencies-ADA_Compliant_FINAL.pdf
- 4 Report on the Condition of Education 2023 (2023). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2023144>.
- 5 Question: As a classroom teacher, how do you feel SEL implementation can be best integrated into the school day? Should it occur during regular instructional time, be a separate class, etc.?
- 6 Question: How well do you think your school is doing at supporting students' SEL? What do you think is working? What is not working?
- 7 Question: As a classroom teacher, how do you feel SEL implementation can be best integrated into the school day? Should it occur during regular instructional time, be a separate class, etc.?
- 8 Question: What resources, time, training, personnel, and systems do you need to successfully support students in developing these competencies?
- 9 Question: How do you think SEL implementation at your school could be better aligned or informed by these competencies?
- 10 Question: What resources, time, training, personnel, and systems do you need to successfully support students in developing these competencies?
- 11 Question: As a classroom teacher, how do you feel SEL implementation can be best integrated into the school day? Should it occur during regular instructional time, be a separate class, etc.?
- 12 Ibid.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Section 1: SEL Implementation

1. What is your school doing to support students' social and emotional learning (e.g. specific programs, training?)
2. How well do you think your school is doing at supporting students' SEL? What do you think is working? What is not working?
3. As a classroom teacher, how do you feel SEL implementation can be best integrated into the school day? Should it occur during regular instructional time, be a separate class, etc.?

Section 2: Michigan SEL Competencies Framework

4. To what extent are the competencies being addressed in your school?
5. How do you think SEL implementation at your school could be better aligned or informed by these competencies?
6. What resources, time, training, personnel, and systems do you need to successfully support students in developing these competencies?