

Washington SEL Professional Learning Network Peer-to-Peer Virtual Exchange: Exploring Challenges With Social Emotional Learning Implementation

Session Summary

The Washington SEL Professional Learning Network provides Washington state education professionals with social emotional learning (SEL)-related learning opportunities to support local educational agencies (LEAs) around the state in building the conditions, supports, and community partnerships that allow students to develop and apply social emotional skills. This peer-to-peer virtual exchange brought nine LEA teams together to discuss and troubleshoot their SEL implementation efforts.

Before the session, LEA teams reflected on their strengths and challenges in SEL implementation. During the session, the LEA teams met in small groups to discuss a specific challenge and to brainstorm strategies and solutions, keeping in mind the essential elements and guiding principles of the Washington SEL Framework. Next, LEA teams began building an action plan, reconvening as a whole group at the end of the session to share their next steps. The session concluded with participants sharing a word to encapsulate how they were feeling about SEL implementation; those who responded offered positive, forward-looking words like “inspired,” “energized,” and “hopeful.”

Common Challenges and Potential Strategies

The four most common challenges LEA teams shared were: (a) building adult capacity, (b) coordinating districtwide SEL, (c) integrating SEL into a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), and (d) defining and implementing SEL in the secondary grades. This section describes each challenge area, presents a summary of the strategies and solutions discussed, and references the segments of the [Washington SEL Online Module](#) that can support follow-up learning. The Washington SEL Online Module is a free resource housed on the [OSPI Learn](#) platform. The module comprises seven segments. [Clock hours](#) are available for completion of each segment.

For information about other SEL implementation resources, including the *Washington SEL Implementation Guide*, please see the [SEL Professional Learning Network web page](#).



Building Adult Capacity

Building adult capacity is an essential element of SEL implementation.¹ Districts shared that leadership and staff buy-in for SEL implementation is vital yet can be a challenge. Staff need opportunities to build their own social emotional skills and to shift mindsets. Additionally, staff need support in understanding how and when to deliver SEL instruction through a curriculum, integrated within academics, and in their daily interactions with students. To give staff the adult capacity-building supports they need, funding must be available, along with opportunities to connect with other schools and districts.

Peer LEAs identified several potential strategies for addressing this challenge area, including conducting whole-staff training related to SEL instruction and adult social emotional skill building, identifying “ambassador teachers” who can help model and build understanding with colleagues, offering educators opportunities to visit other classrooms and buildings to observe successful practices in action, building a culture committee to support staff, and clearly defining SEL and how it fits with other initiatives, including MTSS.

Following is a list of the specific segments of the Washington SEL Online Module that can support additional learning related to building adult capacity.²

Segment	Overview	Connections to the Challenge Area
Segment 2: Embedding SEL Schoolwide	Explores school-level policies and practices to embed SEL within the functioning of schools	Segment 2 provides information about the various ways that SEL can be thoroughly integrated within a school’s policies and practices. This segment also helps educators align SEL with other initiatives and describes the actions that administrators can take to embed SEL within the core functioning of the school.
Segment 3: Creating a Professional Culture Based on SEL	Provides information about adult SEL	Segment 3 describes ways in which adults can engage in self-care to reduce stress and professional burnout. Additionally, this segment addresses ways in which an educator’s implicit bias influences interactions with students and colleagues.

¹ In the *Washington SEL Implementation Guide*, “Build Adult Capacity” is one of the three essential elements of SEL implementation. The guide specifies that local systems should “[b]uild adult capacity in terms of awareness, attitudes, and skills that support SEL for all students by creating a leadership team, developing a vision statement, conducting a needs and readiness assessment, creating an implementation plan, and creating a professional learning system” (p. 5).

² The Washington SEL Online Module as a whole is a useful tool for building adult capacity. The downloadable [Facilitator Guide](#) supports school and district teams in using the module for professional learning.

Coordinating Districtwide SEL

While districts are working to build consistent SEL implementation practices, there is also a need to build in autonomy to allow schools to honor their community culture and provide equitable supports. Districts are exploring ways to find the balance between accountability and flexibility—determining what level of support, direction, and requirements to provide and where to allow schools to make building-level decisions.

Peer LEAs identified several potential strategies to address this challenge area. These strategies include using a co-creation process with school staff, building in collaboration across schools to break down silos, and working with school leaders to empower them to promote SEL and use shared language.

Following is a list of the specific segments of the Washington SEL Online Module that can support additional learning related to coordinating districtwide SEL.

Segment	Overview	Connections to the Challenge Area
Segment 2: Embedding SEL Schoolwide	Explores school-level policies and practices to embed SEL within the functioning of schools	Segment 2 helps educators think about ways in which SEL is connected schoolwide. In this segment, educators can explore leadership practices that will guide them in the process of embedding SEL within the core functioning of the school.
Segment 3: Creating a Professional Culture Based on SEL	Provides information about adult SEL	Segment 3 provides strategies for creating a professional culture in which culturally responsive SEL is a key ingredient. Educators will also be able to review strategies for communicating and engaging with families and community members in culturally responsive ways to build community culture.

Integrating SEL Within MTSS

Districts have observed an increase in the mental health needs of students and staff. More than ever before, school leaders are seeing students who need Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports. It is difficult to talk about and implement Tier 1 supports, like SEL instruction, when schools are facing extreme crisis. There is a need to build responsive and timely MTSS to provide the necessary and urgent supports; however, schools have limited capacity to do so.

To address this challenge area, peer LEAs identified several potential strategies, such as creating a tiered matrix, to identify what practices and interventions are happening at each tier of MTSS. For each practice or intervention, LEAs can identify which SEL guiding principles are supporting them. In recognizing the mental health needs of staff and the importance of building adult

capacity for SEL, peer LEAs identified two additional elements in building SEL within MTSS: providing supports for staff well-being and focusing on consistent practices.

Following is a list of the specific segments of the Washington SEL Online Module that can support additional learning related to integrating SEL within MTSS.

Segment	Overview	Connections to the Challenge Area
Segment 4: Integrating SEL Into Culturally Responsive Classrooms	Provides tools and resources on how to embed and integrate SEL into classroom practices in a culturally responsive way	Segment 4 describes how to integrate SEL into Tier 1 classroom instruction through culturally responsive practices that promote growth in student SEL skills.
Segment 5: Trauma-Informed Practice and SEL	Provides information on how trauma affects the developing brain and shows how SEL can support students experiencing trauma	Segment 5 focuses on ensuring that SEL practices and programs are trauma-informed and recognize the unique strengths and challenges of children and youth in light of the adversities they face. This content could support LEAs that expressed a need to address the pressing concerns of the school community as they work to develop integrated MTSS.

Defining and Implementing SEL in the Secondary Grades

Social emotional learning looks different in middle and high school than it does in elementary school. There is a need to clearly define what SEL means at the secondary level and identify ways to provide supports that are effective, meaningful, accessible, and equitable. There is also a need to identify ways to measure practices, like modeling and daily routines, that nurture SEL outside of a curriculum.

Peer LEAs identified several strategies to address this challenge area, such as providing professional development for staff, integrating SEL into content areas, and supporting SEL instruction through career and technical education programs. Additionally, if educators are using a curriculum, one strategy includes identifying opportunities to reinforce skills in other areas to build alignment. Lastly, other ways to address this challenge area include shifting school schedules to find consistent time blocks for supporting SEL instruction and obtaining feedback from student advisory councils.

Following is a list of the specific segments of the Washington SEL Online Module that can support additional learning related to defining and implementing SEL in the secondary grades.

Segment	Overview	Connections to the Challenge Area
Segment 4: Integrating SEL Into Culturally Responsive Classrooms	Provides tools and resources on how to embed and integrate SEL into classroom practices in a culturally responsive way	Segment 4 describes how to integrate SEL into daily classroom instruction and routines through culturally responsive practices that promote growth in students' SEL skills. Many of the strategies discussed, including creation of cooperative, nurturing learning environments and integration of SEL within academic instruction, apply across all grade levels, including the secondary grades.
Segment 6: Identifying and Selecting Evidence-Based SEL Programs	Provides strategies on how to select SEL programs in a way that meets the needs of diverse students	Segment 6 aims to assist educators in identifying and selecting evidence-based SEL programs. This segment gives an overview of effective programs, frameworks, and curricula that bolster social emotional development for students and adults, including programs for the secondary grades.

LEAs also may benefit from these current resources that focus on SEL in the secondary grades:

- [Navigating SEL From the Inside Out: Looking Inside & Across 18 Leading SEL Programs: A Practical Resource for Schools and OST Providers—Middle & High School Focus](#) (The EASEL Lab at The Harvard Graduate School of Education)
- [How can schools successfully build the social and emotional competencies of high school students?](#) (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments)
- [Instructional Practices That Integrate Equity-Centered Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning](#) (American Institutes for Research, Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety, and National University)