

SEL Playbook for Superintendents

18 Superintendents Share Their Best
Social-Emotional Learning Leadership Advice

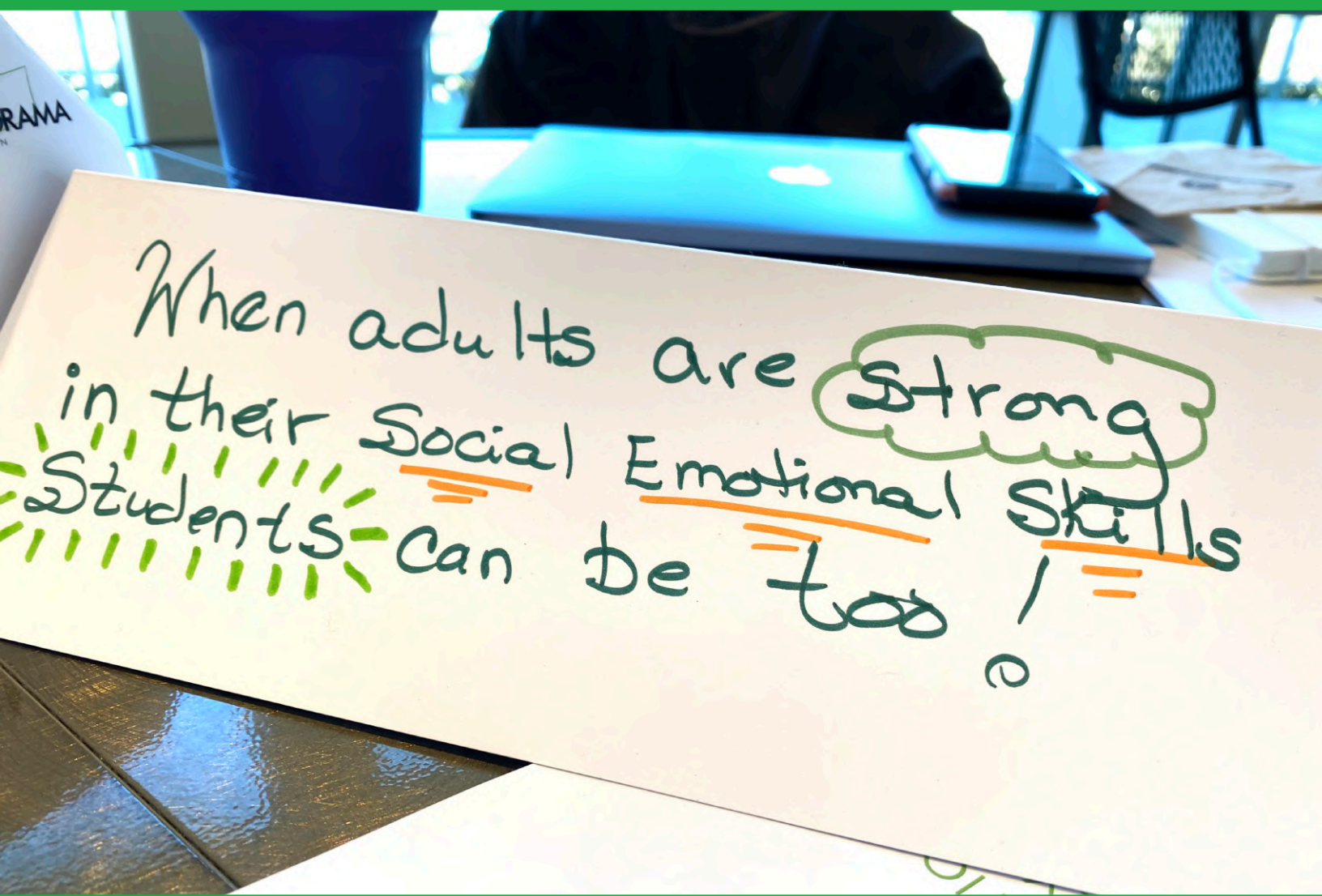


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Leading social-emotional learning is difficult work.

At the same time, [social-emotional learning \(SEL\)](#) is more important now than ever.

Districts that build a strong foundation for SEL *now* will set up their students to thrive in today's changing educational landscape. As Dr. John Marschhausen, superintendent of Ohio's Hilliard City Schools, said on [a recent webinar](#):

“As we focus on the addition of social-emotional learning to our everyday life, we need to realize that it is not an ‘and’ that will come at the expense of our academic work. It’s an ‘and’ that allows us to build on our academic work.”

We were lucky enough to connect with 18 superintendents and senior district leaders who dedicated their time and expertise to the following question:

What is the single most effective “change management” strategy you’ve used to lead SEL in your district?

In this playbook, we compiled exactly what they shared with us. Each section focuses on an SEL leadership play, followed by their specific advice and recommendations for education leaders.

Play #1: Start with adult mindsets.

Great leaders know that social-emotional learning starts with adults. The way that administrators, teachers, and staff show up at school can have a profound impact on students' academic, social, and emotional development.

“ In our journey to meet the social-emotional learning needs of students, we learned that social-emotional learning begins with the adults. Once we prioritized developing SEL capacity in adults, we found that students, teachers, families, and the overall school culture benefitted.

I wish we would have prioritized adult SEL sooner. We cannot expect students to manage their emotions and build effective relationships if the adults around them are unable to model this process.”



Dr. Sabrina Claude McGahee
Superintendent of Schools
Old Redford Academy School District (MI)

“ We've focused on **modeling the five core SEL competencies**, as well as pointing out teachable moments for our adults so that they become aware of their own social-emotional needs to come to a realization that youth have them as well. Awareness leads to empathy, which leads to relationship building.”



Rose Ann Bomentre, Ed.D
Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services
Baldy View Regional Occupational Program (CA)



The Long Beach Unified School District created documents that describe four key understandings that teachers need to have, and the three key practices that they would demonstrate if they possessed each understanding.

We call these understandings U1, U2, U3, and U4. These understandings are all about classroom teaching of the common core. To support U1-U4, we then created U5, which describes effective educator collaboration. **As we reflected on this work, we began to have conversations about what was missing.**

That is when we developed U6: Cultivating a classroom atmosphere where teachers deliberately balance caring relationships with high expectations and supports for student success. The three teacher practices for U6 include:

1. Establishes a classroom climate of warm, caring relationships
2. Sets high expectations and provides necessary supports for student success
3. Creates a safe learning environment that values diversity, trust, and respectful communication

By writing the definition of what it means to be warm and demanding, **we opened up a new way for our educators to reflect on their practice.** This created new conversations and expanded ways of thinking about students' needs. While it doesn't capture our whole SEL approach, it is one example of a leadership change management strategy that we have found has made a difference."



Kristi Kahl

Assistant Superintendent, Research & School Improvement
Long Beach Unified School District (CA)

“ The most effective strategy was beginning with **understanding the ‘why’ behind SEL for teachers**. Then we could get to what SEL is and collectively how we can make a difference in the lives of the children we serve by committing to teaching SEL and the whole child.

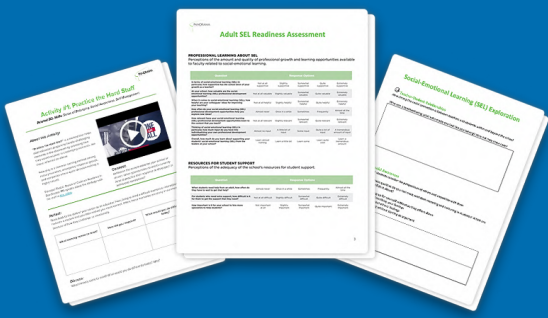
What we wish we had done earlier was create more space for teacher leaders to research and decide on the initial ‘how’ of the implementation of SEL.”



Dr. Amy Swann
Chief Executive Officer
Matchbook Learning (National)

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Play #2:

Embed SEL into your vision, mission, and strategic plan.

The social curriculum is just as important as the academic curriculum. Build a comprehensive and systemic approach to SEL that aligns resources and learning around the whole child.

“ From a superintendent’s perspective, I like to ask, ‘Have we embedded SEL into our vision and policy?’ At Andover, **SEL skills are very much part of our mission statement.** Here are the four core SEL practices embedded into our plan:

1. **Teaching Empathy and Social Skills:** By directly teaching SEL through programs like Open Circle and Second Step, we help children become sensitive observers of the feelings of others, take the perspective of others, and resolve conflict positively.
2. **Community Building:** The culture in the classroom needs to create a caring sense of belonging for students. We hold Responsive Classroom morning meetings, open circles, buddy programs, and mentorship programs to build community.
3. **Curriculum Integration:** SEL must be echoed in our teaching. We engage in collaborative pedagogy in every subject area, integrate SEL into content areas such as literacy and social studies, and provide high school courses that deepen this work.
4. **Service Learning:** This enables students to take the skills they've learned and apply them to the world at large through intergenerational, educational, environmental, humanitarian, or political work.



Sheldon Berman, Ed.D
 Superintendent
 Andover Public Schools (MA)



Collier County Public Schools has defined five social-emotional learning priorities and mental health supports in our strategic plan. These five priorities include:

1. **New Student 30/60 Day Check-in:** Focuses on the successful acclimation of students for all grade levels. Counselors meet with each student to ensure that they are making connections with teachers and peers.
2. **Handle With Care:** Focuses on student safety and mental well-being, triggering an "alert" to school staff regarding a student who has experienced a recent traumatic event.
3. **Buddy Bench / We Dine Together:** These strategies help students who feel isolated or alone. We've installed Buddy Benches at all 29 CCPS elementary schools to foster social awareness and friendship on playgrounds. We Dine Together is a program for middle schools and high schools to ensure that no one sits alone at lunch time.
4. **Principal-led SEL Videos:** Focuses on developing SEL competencies with our school staff and students. Twice a month, the principal introduces a SEL concept on the morning announcements, including a video and simple ideas for how to apply the concept during the school day.
5. **Panorama Education SEL:** Students in grades 3-12 have the opportunity to tell us what they think about their experiences at school and how we can better support them. These anonymous surveys allow us to identify and address overall school-wide trends. We measure Sense of Belonging, Growth Mindset, Teacher-Student Relationships, Emotional Regulation, and Grit with Panorama.



Dr. Peggy Aune

Associate Superintendent, Curriculum and Instruction
Collier County Public Schools (FL)

Play #3:

Build SEL into curriculum and instruction.

Social-emotional learning doesn't happen on its own. Your district should take an intentional approach to SEL — whether it is taught explicitly or integrated into existing curricula.

“ As a district, **it's important that you build an SEL-explicit instructional plan that builds coherence from class to class, grade to grade, and school to school.** This will support students' executive functioning skills over time. You need an intentional, integrated approach that embeds essential components aligned to child and brain development.

At Ferndale, we use the work of incredible researchers to design our elementary modules and support our secondary classes. The elementary 'learning plan' modules teach our students about the brain states, growth mindset, executive function skills, and mindfulness. The learning plans lead to building a sense of ownership, trust, and strong relationships.

At the secondary level, we added a 'seventh-hour' class for students called Impact Hour/CPC (College Prep Course). This time is dedicated to conversations essential to building trust, mutual respect, and a connection to school and life.

Throughout the year, students have the same Impact Hour/CPC teacher. We also have student representatives on our secondary SEL committees, which has added student voices to the development of our activities.”



Dina Rocheleau
Assistant Superintendent
Ferndale Schools (MI)



The most effective 'change management strategy' that [Learn4Life](#) has used to lead social-emotional learning in our schools is the adoption of its **Trauma-Resilient Educational Communities (TREC) model**, which is based on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) science.

With a focus on serving opportunity youth, we quickly found that in order to reach a student's head to learn, we had to reach their heart and earn their trust. Traumatized children who learn to thrive have someone in their life who encourages them and believes in their success.

The five ways that the TREC model is applied for student success are by:

1. Providing a personalized learning model of education
2. Providing wraparound services to help with the essentials of life
3. Infusing all instruction with trauma-informed practices to create a resilient student
4. Providing accountability and encouragement through an abundance of counselors, mentors and support staff
5. Exposing them to job skills in order to build confidence

In the coming months and beyond, **school leaders who understand and integrate trauma-informed practices into teaching** will find greater and long-term success for students.



Caprice Young, Ed.D
National Superintendent
Learn4Life (CA)

Play #4: Invest in ongoing professional development.

SEL is not a "one and done" initiative. It takes continued education and training over time. Ongoing professional development will increase staff buy-in and help you find SEL champions in your buildings.



As leaders, we need to provide **the time, the training, and the background** for our teachers to be able to **accept and embrace the shift to social-emotional learning**.

For some of our teachers, this is something new. It is not what the training looked like in teacher education schools. As we work with our staff to show them the great impact we can have by focusing on social-emotional learning skills and the whole child, it allows us to get them to move.

In public education, we have a lot of room for growth to move away from a standardization approach that's remnant of *A Nation at Risk*, to a time where we meet kids where they are and we personalize education."

Watch my webinar presentation here: <https://www.panoramaed.com/webinar/incorporating-sel-planning>



Dr. John Marschhausen
Superintendent
Hilliard City Schools (OH)



After a few initial presentations about SEL, ACES, and trauma-informed practices, our staff began to really understand and embrace the concept of social-emotional learning.

However, it seemed like SEL was not being widely adopted, but treated as a separate curriculum. Principals were delivering curriculum and activities for SEL days, but the initiative was not incorporated across the board and as part of day-to-day classroom implementation.

In the fall of 2019, we were fortunate to **gain an SEL coach who is a state leader in SEL**. He provided one day per week of working one on one with staff—complementing, mentoring, and showing effective ways to implement SEL in everyday language. The work has been really paying dividends. **I would recommend other districts consider trying this in buildings to grow a core of staff who are deeply engaged in SEL.**”



Marcus Morgan
 Superintendent
 Reardan-Edwall School District (WA)



Find your SEL champions and get out of their way! Those with a passion for understanding and helping kids will ignite it in others. You know it's working when new members are invited to the SEL team and they are ‘honored’ to have been tapped. Also, dig into your data. Statistics will guide your SEL work by separating needs from myths.”



Dr. Eva G. Merkel
 Superintendent
 Lakeland School Corporation (IN)

Play #5:

Collaborate and connect with other leaders.

No matter where you are in your social-emotional learning journey, seek out opportunities to learn from other leaders and educators embarking on this critical work.

“ One of the best things for me was to be able to collaborate with other central Ohio school districts. Upon building a working relationship with Panorama Education, I quickly started talking with other central Ohio districts, and thankfully, many jumped on board with the same [Panorama SEL Survey](#).

After a year of administering the survey and reviewing our data, we pulled together 50 like-minded educational leaders from across the state and hosted a day of professional learning at our Worthington Education Center.

I collaborated with Panorama leaders to make this happen, and we were able to learn so much from one another and build relationships to forge continued brainstorming and idea-sharing with one another. **This is difficult, yet really important work, and we must be in it together.**”



Angie Adrean
Chief Academic Officer
Worthington Schools (OH)



The most important strategy to lead SEL is **to engage others in dialogue about their experience** and the ways they are finding meaning within the challenges they are facing. It isn't the absence of stress that is the goal. Rather, it is finding meaning in the situation that is most transformational.

One thing that we wish we had started doing earlier is sharing presentations by Dr. Jean Clinton, an internationally renowned advocate for children's issues.”



Dr. Mary Ann Reilly

Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning
Newark Public Schools (NJ)

Play #6:

Model caring for yourself.

You can't pour from an empty cup. Consider how you are attending to your own social and emotional well-being and mindfulness as a leader.

“ The main strategy that I use is to make sure that I am taking care of myself emotionally. **I need to be strong and lead my staff in a calm and assuring way.** I also have to acknowledge that my staff may not be as calm and emotionally stable as their leaders, and I must respond to them accordingly.”



Brenton White
Superintendent
A+ Charter Schools (TX)



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Bonus:

Incorporating SEL into distance learning and back-to-school planning



“We have to be conscious of **the level of trauma that students are experiencing** and understand that children respond differently to trauma, so that we adjust and provide the resources that are necessary—whether that be social workers, guidance counselors, or teachers.

We need to focus more on relationships and building a safe community rather than solely on academics. We can communicate that in a hundred different ways, whether it’s videos, emails, letters, or video chats. We need to align our resources of who’s available to help with trauma. And finally, **we need to continue to tap into student voice** through surveys and focus groups. We just administered [Panorama’s distance learning surveys](#) to give us that feedback.”



Sheldon Berman, Ed.D
 Superintendent
 Andover Public Schools (MA)



I wish that (something not terrible) had pushed us to do more online for kids. We know they're on there, and we need to reach them in the formats they use.

We've engaged in extensive training and support for all counselors through Hatching Results. Counselors have learned to create SEL lessons, podcasts, presentations, and videos for kids to access. One counselor is even teaching kids how to do chores to help around the house through short Twitter videos. The common message is: **'We are here for you. Call us if you need us!'**



Lori Villanueva
Superintendent
Coalinga Huron Unified School District (CA)



SEL is about supporting our team members and our students. We are all learners grappling with our own emotions and those of our children. This is a time for classified team members to take the lead in offering personal, concierge-type support by **'adopting' families and offering support through phone calls.**



Cheryl Jordan
Superintendent
Milpitas Unified School District (CA)

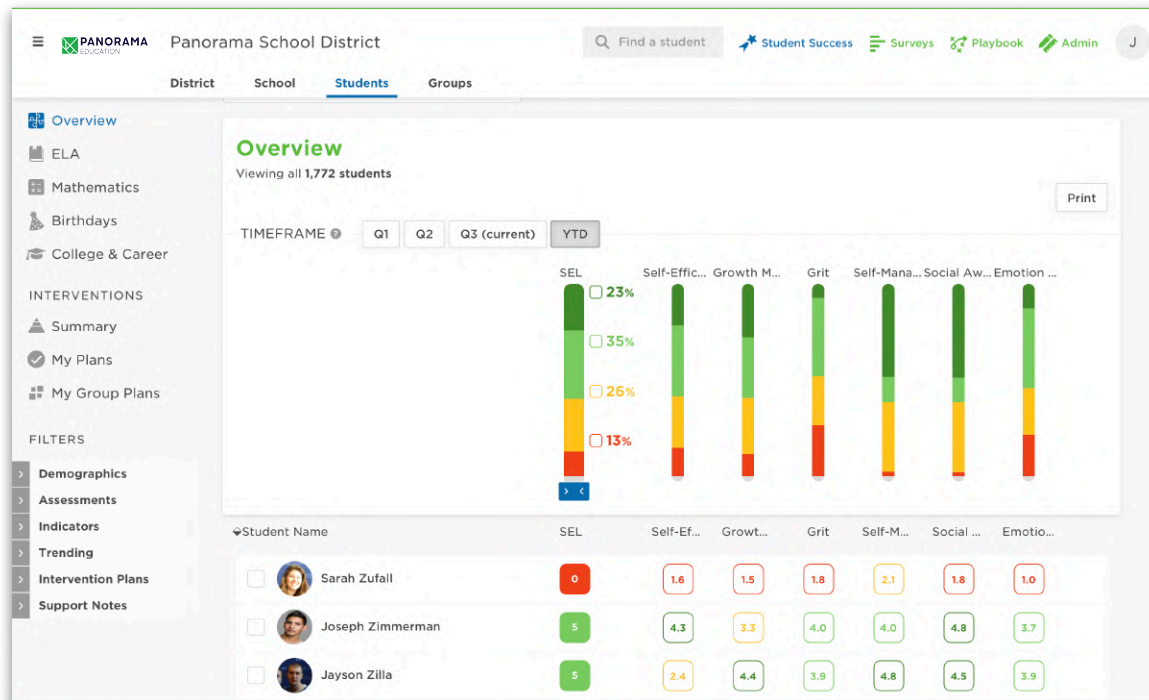


During COVID-19, I have included SEL strategies in my **weekly communication to staff.** In addition, I add them to my parent communication."



Dr. Beth A. Smith
Interim Superintendent
Shelton Public Schools (CT)

Measure and understand social-emotional learning with Panorama



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