

INTEGRATING SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING WITHIN A
MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS TO ADVANCE EQUITY

SEL MTSS TOOLKIT

FOR STATE & DISTRICT LEADERS



THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF STATE SCHOOL OFFICERS

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, states, districts, and schools across the country began using a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to organize and deliver academic and behavioral support for students. At its core, MTSS serves as a framework to support practitioners in using data to ensure that all students are equipped with the skills they need to succeed. Education leaders are increasingly interested in explicitly incorporating social and emotional learning (SEL) within the MTSS framework. This interest is motivated by the desire to more intentionally connect academics and behavior to build equitable systems that ensure all students receive the support they need to succeed. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), and the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) developed this toolkit with the support of the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) and in collaboration with leaders from nine state education agencies (SEAs) across the country that are actively working to integrate SEL and MTSS.

The impact of COVID-19 and the increased attention to systemic injustice has led to a heightened sense of urgency from states and districts to better—and more equitably—meet the needs of the whole child. Recent interdisciplinary scholarship on the science of learning and development demonstrates that, for students to thrive, education systems must address the whole child, that is “the full range of children’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs” (Science of Learning and Development Alliance, 2020, p. 4). MTSS and SEL are both designed to create safe and supportive environments that build positive relationships and foster student learning and development. In addition, both frameworks prioritize adult capacity building and using data to inform decisions about student supports. In tandem, MTSS and SEL can promote the teaching and learning conditions that help children and youth build the skills and competencies that can be applied across educational trajectories.

Beginning in October 2020, CCSSO and CASEL convened a community of practice (CoP) of cross-division teams from SEAs committed to working collaboratively to identify opportunities to integrate equity-focused SEL within MTSS to bring alignment and coherence with existing priorities, systems, and practices and ensure a focus on whole-child development. Out of a robust pool of applicants, nine states were selected to engage in this effort: Alabama, Hawai'i, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Virginia. The states engaged with one another, field leaders, and national experts in a set of peer-to-peer learning experiences over the course of 9 months.

Each state team developed a state alignment plan. States made significant progress towards their goal of integrating SEL within an MTSS framework through listening to stakeholder voices, conceptualizing how initiatives fit together, developing a shared understanding that reflects cultural values and beliefs, and ensuring the empowerment of schools.

This toolkit draws on the resources and learnings from CoP activities.

INTRODUCTION

This toolkit is designed to support policy makers and leaders in other states as well as district leaders who are interested in engaging in the work of intentional SEL and MTSS integration. The toolkit addresses five key questions to support state and district leaders in advancing equitable, integrated SEL and MTSS:

1

What do we mean by SEL, MTSS & equity?

Section 1 defines key terms related to SEL and MTSS and articulates how both sets of practices are connected to equity.

2

Why integrate SEL into MTSS?

Section 2 provides the rationale for integrating SEL into MTSS.

3

What does it look like to integrate SEL into MTSS?

Section 3 describes the “look-fors” of SEL integrated within an MTSS framework.

4

How can state & district leaders get started?

Section 4 provides integration guidance that draws on the work of the nine CoP states.

5

Where do we go from here?

Section 5 provides a set of considerations to inform next steps for the field.

1

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SEL, MTSS & EQUITY?

At the state and local levels, the individuals who oversee SEL and those responsible for MTSS often work in different divisions. Education leaders interested in integrating SEL and MTSS need a shared understanding of key terms related to each of these frameworks and opportunities to engage cross-divisionally (Charlton et al., 2018).

A detailed [glossary](#) is found in the Appendix of this toolkit.

DEFINING SEL

CASEL defines SEL as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, 2021c, para. 1). Figure 1 depicts the [CASEL SEL Framework](#) (CASEL, 2020).

CASEL articulates five areas of competence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These areas—the CASEL 5—have served as the foundation for many state and local social and emotional standards and competencies.

CASEL’s framework takes a systemic approach that emphasizes the importance of establishing equitable learning environments and coordinating practices across key settings of classrooms, schools, families, and communities to enhance all students’ social, emotional, and academic learning. In this model, SEL is not confined to a specific program where SEL content is delivered to students only through a discrete period of instruction. At the school level, systemic, schoolwide SEL can be observed through a [set of indicators](#) of classroom-level and schoolwide practices that are ongoing and continuous, and include integrating SEL into academic instruction and focusing on adult SEL.

CASEL is refining approaches to SEL implementation that highlight SEL practices on promoting equity and school and civic engagement toward more just schools. These approaches highlight processes whereby young people and adults build strong, respectful and lasting relationships to develop collaborative solutions that lead to personal, community and societal wellbeing.

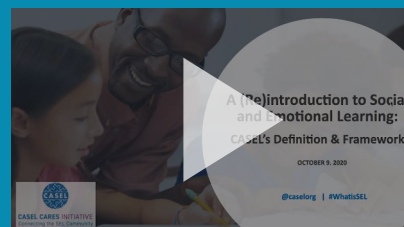
FIGURE 1. CASEL SEL FRAMEWORK



THE EVOLUTION OF THE CASEL SEL FRAMEWORK

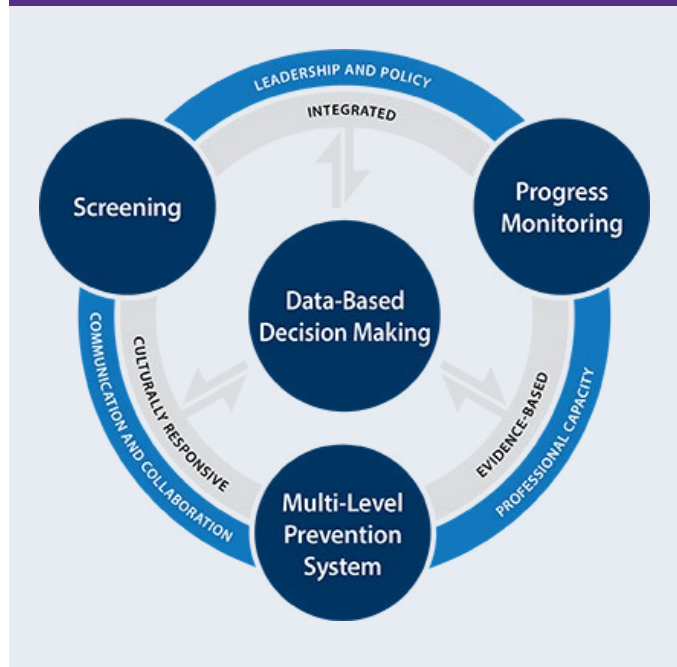
In 2020, CASEL updated its framework to reflect current insights on how SEL can support excellence and equity. Learn more about the updates in this 50-minute video from CASEL:

[A Reintroduction to SEL: CASEL’s Definition and Framework](#)



DEFINING MTSS

FIGURE 2. THE MTSS FRAMEWORK FROM THE MTSS CENTER AT AIR



A multi-tiered system of supports is a proactive and preventive framework that integrates data and instruction to maximize student achievement and support students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs from a strengths-based perspective. MTSS offers a framework for educators to engage in data-based decision-making related to program improvement, high-quality instruction and intervention, social and emotional learning, and positive behavioral supports necessary to ensure positive outcomes for districts, schools, teachers, and students. Figure 2 provides the MTSS Framework from the Center on Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS Center, 2021e) at AIR.

The MTSS Framework includes four essential components: multilevel prevention system, data-based decision-making, universal screening, and progress monitoring. Depending on state law, MTSS data may also support identification of students with learning or other disabilities.

MTSS originally began as a response to the misuse or misinterpretation of [Response to Intervention \(RTI\)](#). The MTSS terminology and related framework have gained in popularity over the past decade. In many places, the term MTSS was applied with the integration of academic (RTI) and behavioral (e.g., Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support [PBIS]) tiered support systems.

MTSS ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS

Explore the specific steps for each of the essential components on the MTSS Center website.

[Multilevel Prevention System](#)

[Universal Screening](#)

[Data-Based Decision-Making](#)

[Progress Monitoring](#)

To assess the fidelity of their overall MTSS, districts and schools can use the [MTSS Fidelity Rubric](#) and worksheet to drive continuous improvement efforts.

DEFINING EQUITY

Educational equity means that “every student has access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background and/or family income” (Aspen Education and Society Program & CCSSO, 2017, p. 2). However, this vision has not yet been achieved in schools across the nation. Both SEL and MTSS have the potential to support education leaders in reaching the vision of an equitable education system (see sidebar), and, as articulated in **Section 2**, this potential is multiplied when the two approaches are intentionally integrated.

LEARN MORE: SEL, MTSS, & EQUITY

During the summer of 2020, the nation watched as racial injustice was exposed and brought to the forefront of public awareness. As a backdrop to this national uprising, hundreds of thousands perished from COVID-19 with a disproportionate number of infections and deaths affecting communities of color. This time in our socio-political history presented challenges that students faced in different ways. There is no doubt that students of color and white students experienced and responded to these events differently, based on their lived experiences and positionality in American society.

SEL and MTSS have the potential to help all students strengthen and apply social and emotional competencies and to support leaders in reaching the vision of an equitable U.S. public education system.

- SEL provides the skills needed for educators and students to be self-aware, be socially conscious, engage in critical thinking and courageous discussions with others, and make responsible decisions about what is right and their role in social change. Visit CASEL’s guide to schoolwide SEL for [guidance and resources on SEL and equity](#).
- Equity-focused MTSS provides the framework for learning, acknowledging that all learning is cultural and relational. Through equity-focused MTSS, teachers provide differentiated instruction that values and leverages students’ strengths, cultural identity, language, and lived experience (Gay, 2002). Check out the [MTSS Center’s website](#) for more information on how MTSS incorporates practices that are foundational to addressing equity in education.

KEY RESOURCES



[Guide to Schoolwide SEL](#) and [District Resource Center](#) (CASEL)

[Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs](#) (CCSSO)

[Resources to Support Equity Commitments](#) (CCSSO)

[The Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports \(MTSS Center\)](#) (AIR)

[The Center to Improve SEL and School Safety](#) (WestEd)

[The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#) (AIR)

REVIEW & REFLECT



State and district teams - Use the following reflection questions to connect learning to your work with SEL and MTSS and to prepare to engage in the alignment and coherence process which will be described in Section 4 of the toolkit:

Do the leaders in your state or district have a shared understanding of the core elements of SEL and MTSS?

In what ways do your system’s existing SEL and/or MTSS efforts promote equity?

2

WHY INTEGRATE SEL INTO MTSS?

What is the rationale for integrating SEL within an MTSS framework? The states that participated in the CoP believe that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. While SEL and MTSS complement one another, simply trying to advance both efforts in parallel without intentional integration is a missed opportunity to build coherence and to foster a system of support that efficiently—and equitably—addresses the needs of the whole child.

As education leaders work to support the whole child, particularly in the face of growing needs and demands on their time, they must consider how to work more effectively and efficiently across SEA or local education agency (LEA) divisions as well as how best to leverage partnerships with external organizations. Both SEL and MTSS elevate individualized support while also fostering broader conditions for teaching and learning, emphasize building the capacity of the adults who support students, prioritize supportive (not punitive) approaches to improving student behavior, and require coordination and collaboration with families and communities. Together, when they intentionally attend to cultural competence and youth and family empowerment, SEL and MTSS help to promote the schoolwide conditions, individual competencies, and equitable learning environments that help students be successful.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

FOR INTEGRATING SEL INTO MTSS

The following are foundational principles about how systemic, schoolwide SEL can drive equity and support student thriving. Taken together, the principles provide the rationale for integrating SEL into MTSS and are endorsed by the partner organizations and the state teams participating in the CoP.

All students and adults thrive in a safe, just, and supportive school climate.

SEL supports the formation of a [positive school climate](#) (Durlak et al., 2011), which in turn establishes the foundation for effective support systems—including MTSS. According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2021), “a positive school climate is the product of a school’s attention to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community” (para. 1). A positive school climate provides students with a sense of belonging and of physical, emotional, and identity safety and is associated with outcomes such as improved academic achievement and fewer behavioral problems. In contrast, a negative school climate is associated with school disengagement, a lack of connection, and academic challenges. SEL and school climate have a reciprocal relationship (Osher & Berg, 2017).

SEL is foundational to academics and behavior.

SEL is strengths based and foundational to students’ [academic and behavioral success](#). We know that learning is social and emotional (Immordino-Yang et al., 2018) and that high-quality SEL programs and practices result in improved student academic, behavioral, and life outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; R. D. Taylor et al., 2017). When students have opportunities to develop and practice social and emotional skills, mindsets, and attitudes, students are better equipped to successfully navigate the demands of school and life.

All students have equitable access to a tiered system of supports with SEL at the center.

Through [systemic SEL](#), SEL approaches are infused throughout every interaction and setting students encounter (Mahoney et al., 2020). MTSS is designed to help practitioners organize supports in a multilevel prevention system so that all students have what they need to succeed (Schumann et al., 2020). By integrating SEL into MTSS, education systems provide students with more of the vital opportunities to develop and apply social and emotional competencies.

Social and emotional skills are intentionally fostered using evidence-based, culturally relevant, equity-focused, and developmentally appropriate practices supported by SEL learning standards.

It is not enough for education systems to implement programs or practices labeled as SEL without a careful interrogation of whether those programs and practices reflect what we know is most critical for supporting student social and emotional development. Education leaders must consider the [evidence on the effectiveness of programs](#) and practices and the extent to which these programs and practices align with SEL learning standards. In addition, the science of learning and development demonstrates that learning is progressive and continuous, and that context is critical (Science of Learning and Development Alliance, 2020)—programs and practices must consider students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences as well as their unique developmental needs and align SEL practices accordingly.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

FOR INTEGRATING SEL INTO MTSS

Youth voice and engagement support the development of student identity, agency, and belonging.

Young people offer a powerful and unique perspective on what is happening in schools, what is working, and how things could be improved. Intentionally providing [opportunities for youth to weigh in](#) on what they are experiencing as learners helps to foster the supportive and inclusive conditions that students need in order to learn and develop (DePaoli et al., 2018).

Adult SEL is intentionally supported to ensure student SEL is fostered.

[Strengthening adult social and emotional competencies](#) supports student SEL, because adults with more robust competencies are better able to form supportive relationships with students, model social and emotional skills, and build a positive climate and culture (Yoder et al., 2018). In addition, adults with strong social and emotional competencies are more aware of their own biases and how those biases influence their practice. This awareness is a critical starting point for actively working to counteract those biases and creating more equitable learning environments for students (Simmons, Brackett, and Adler, 2018). For more on school climate see the [Aspen Institute's School Climate Playbook](#).

Families, caregivers, and communities are critical partners in building equitable systems that support students' academic, social, and emotional development.

Students learn and develop across multiple contexts—in school, at [home](#), and in the [community](#) (Youth Development Work Group, 2018). [CASEL's framework](#) (CASEL, 2020) situates social and emotional learning and development in four key settings: in classrooms, in schools, within families and with caregivers, and in communities. An MTSS framework is strengthened when school teams build partnerships across all these settings to coordinate supports for students.

Supportive discipline policies and practices are instructive, restorative, developmentally appropriate, and equitably applied.

School discipline and behavior policies are critical levers that can advance or hinder equity. For example, punitive and exclusionary practices are disproportionately applied and yield inequitable and harmful outcomes for students (Colombi et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2021). Conversely, [restorative practices](#) align with what we know about student social and emotional learning and development by offering an alternative way of responding to harm or misconduct that “brings together all those involved in conflicts in a way...that helps people address harms, assume responsibility, move past shame and guilt, work things out to everyone’s satisfaction, and build stronger and healthier relationships with each other” (Autumn & Guarino, 2016, p. 13).

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

FOR INTEGRATING SEL INTO MTSS

SEL facilitates equity within MTSS.

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in and a proliferation of resources related to equity-focused SEL. CASEL has developed equity elaborations for their five competencies. The equity elaborations describe how the CASEL competencies can intentionally be leveraged to dismantle oppressive and unjust ways of thinking and build new ways of understanding and engaging in interpersonal relationships. The core components of MTSS provide the backbone to enhance equity which is highlighted in the MTSS graphic as “culturally responsive”. MTSS core components and features can enhance equity through:

- Culturally responsive assessments, instruction, and interventions
- Early intervention
- Equity focused data-based decisions
- Emphasis on high-quality instruction
- Team-based decision-making and strong leadership

Recent literature has highlighted the need for SEL to adequately reflect, cultivate, promote, and leverage cultural strengths of students, especially students of color and those from underserved backgrounds (Jagers et al., 2019). Additionally, some states have published [guidance](#) and statements on the importance of SEL as a lever to address issues of equity in schools (e.g., NYSED, 2018). Addressing educational equity is not as simple as developing a new policy or implementing new evidence-based practices. For more on how SEL facilitates equity in MTSS, see the brief [here](#).

Section 3 explores the specific ways that SEL might be integrated into MTSS in accordance with the shared principles.

KEY RESOURCES



The Aspen Institute's [School Climate Playbook](#)
[Thriving, Robust Equity, and Transformative Learning](#)
[and Development](#) from The Readiness Projects

REVIEW & REFLECT



State and district teams - Use the following reflection questions to connect learning to your work with SEL and MTSS:

Do the shared principles resonate with your team? Where and how do these shared principles align with existing state and/or district policies and practices?

Are there other principles that you would add that support the need for equitable, integrated SEL and MTSS?

3

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO INTEGRATE SEL INTO MTSS?

Implementation of SEL within the tiers of support provides students with instruction that not only is differentiated to meet their academic needs, but also is affirming, culturally relevant, and intentionally removes barriers for historically underserved students.

PROGRESS ON INTEGRATING SEL INTO MTSS

Integrating SEL into MTSS is an emerging area of work for states and districts. For many agencies, MTSS began as an effort to integrate academic and behavioral support systems (e.g., Response to Intervention, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports). With this foundation, states and districts are considering how the MTSS “umbrella” might encompass additional types of support, such as mental health and SEL, and how to leverage federal funding (e.g., [School Climate Transformation Grants](#), [Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education \[AWARE\] Grants](#)) to support MTSS integration. A recent scan of SEA websites showed that seven states have integrated SEL within their MTSS frameworks (Bailey & Harlacher, 2021), but we know that many others have integration efforts underway or under consideration.

Some states and districts are further along in the work of integrating SEL into MTSS. [Michigan](#), for example, has a fully integrated framework that intentionally addresses the needs of the whole child and has expanded its [MTSS framework](#) to support its use in meeting students’ academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and mental health needs. The New York State Education Department has provided guidance on what SEL looks like across the tiers of support (see [Appendix A](#) of its SEL guidance document).

The following section describes the ways that SEL may be integrated into an MTSS framework.

All students possess the ability to learn and should have equitable access to the necessary supports to succeed and thrive in school. With this in mind, we want to consider how we can design instruction for students in a way that affirms their cultural identity and strengths. MTSS is a framework that can facilitate change to reach this goal. In Section 1 you learned that the [MTSS Framework](#) has four essential components (a multilevel prevention system, data-based decision-making, universal screening, and progress monitoring). What does this look like when SEL is placed at the forefront of MTSS? SEL has the greatest potential to support and elevate outcomes for students when it is systemic, that is, infused throughout programs and practices and educational settings at all levels of the system (Mahoney et al., 2020). Implementation of SEL within the tiers of support provides students with instruction that not only is differentiated to meet their academic needs, but also is affirming, culturally relevant, and intentionally removes barriers for historically underserved students.

In this section, we discuss SEL and equity within MTSS, how SEL fits within the multilevel prevention system, and the role of SEL in data-based decision making, screening and progress monitoring and what it looks like when SEL is fully integrated.

SEL WITHIN A MULTILEVEL PREVENTION SYSTEM

A multilevel prevention system in MTSS has three tiers of increasingly significant instruction and intervention. There are opportunities for students to develop and apply social and emotional competencies within all three tiers of support.

Within an MTSS framework, tier 1, the universal level of prevention, includes high-quality instruction, evidence-based practices, high-leverage practices, differentiated instruction, and data-driven instructional decision-making (Jackson, 2018). Tier 1 SEL [programs](#) and practices aim to support students' academic, social, and emotional learning and development. In addition to providing students with opportunities to develop and apply social and emotional competencies, they help to foster a positive and supportive climate and cultivate positive relationships that in turn create the conditions that need to be in place for students to engage in learning across content areas. SEL supports at tier 1 involve embedding practices into the delivery of academic instruction in a proactive manner, setting the foundation for application and generalization of appropriate social-emotional skills both in and out of school and in tiers 2 and 3. Core SEL practices are standards aligned, integrated with academic instruction, positive, preventive, and connected to academic and behavioral expectations.

SEL FOR STUDENTS WITH COMPLEX NEEDS

Students with disabilities and complex needs often have complex social, emotional, and behavior needs. In the brief [Social Emotional Learning and Intensive Intervention](#), The National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) authors describe how SEL can be facilitated across the tiers of support and how to adapt SEL supports for students with the most intense needs.

At tiers 2 and 3, students receive evidence-based academic or behavioral interventions and instruction. At tier 2, students are grouped homogeneously and provided targeted instruction and frequent progress monitoring. At tier 3, students receive more intensive supports, which could include one-on-one interventions. SEL is not on its own an “intervention.” Instead, SEL should be embedded into the design and delivery of the intervention and align with core SEL supports at Tier 1 - all students learn skills, and SEL is an ongoing process for everyone.

A NOTE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Practitioners should be intentional about providing students with supports for developing and applying social and emotional competencies in the context of receiving tier 2 and 3 interventions that align with the way skills are fostered at tier 1. For example, students with complex needs must persevere through challenging content and apply self-management skills to maintain their attention, regulate emotions, and increase motivation. This is an opportune time for practitioners to draw upon the evidence-based SEL practices that are used in tier 1. Similarly, if students are learning goal-setting or decision-making as part of tier 2 or tier 3 interventions, ideally those skills will be taught in a way that is aligned with the evidence-based SEL practices that are being taught to all students at tier 1.

SEL WITHIN A MULTILEVEL PREVENTION SYSTEM

SUPPORTS ARE TIERED — STUDENTS ARE NOT

Students are not “tier 1, 2, or 3 kids” or “IEP kids.” Supports within MTSS are tiered; students are not. Thinking about MTSS in terms of multilevel prevention from a strengths-based perspective can help reframe how students and tiers are discussed.

EXAMPLES

“He is a student who requires tier 2 intervention to be successful in reading.”

“She receives intensive intervention in mathematics aligned to her IEP goals, and she excels at interpersonal skills and self-management and is a fluent reader.”

“He learns best when distractions are removed, and he is able to use a daily point chart to manage his on-task behavior independently.”

When practitioners use this strengths-based reframing, they are putting the [social awareness](#) competency into practice.

SEL AS A CORE TIER 1 SUPPORT

States and districts around the country are promoting SEL as a universal support through SEL standards, guidance and resources, and professional learning opportunities. Read about state efforts to support SEL in CASEL’s latest [Emerging Insights Report](#).

It is not advisable to employ the practice of “tiering” SEL, or having students receive formal targeted or intensive services because of perceived deficiencies in social and emotional competencies. The reason for avoiding this approach is that SEL (not to be confused with behavior interventions) should be proactive, strengths based, and preventive—not an intervention addressing a perceived deficit. Tiering SEL also could lead to unintentionally measuring and pathologizing students in ways that devalue (or even punish them for) their cultural and linguistic differences. With a focus on increasing equity, it is important to keep in mind that implicit bias can impact decision making, including when delivering instruction. Tiering SEL could lead to unintentionally centering mainstream behavior as “right” and punishing students’ ways of being as “wrong” or inherently deficit based. (See section below, “*Mitigating Bias and Appreciating Diversity*.”) SEL can set the condition for effective delivery of instruction and intervention, but in and of itself SEL should be delivered schoolwide and at tier 1 for all students.

INTEGRATING SEL

INTO ASSESSMENT & DATA-BASED DECISION MAKING

Data-based decision-making is the core of the MTSS Framework. Within this framework, schools and districts rely on teams to use multiple types of data (e.g., formative, diagnostic, summative, fidelity) to make informed decisions in these areas:

- 1. Overall system:** Is our MTSS system operating effectively toward its intended outcomes? Are staff implementing with fidelity?
- 2. Tier 1 support:** Is universal programming meeting the needs of most students? Is it meeting the needs of subgroups of students?
- 3. Tier 2 and tier 3 supports:** Are targeted or intensive supports meeting the needs of students receiving these supports? Are students making progress with the interventions they are given? Is the level of intensity appropriate? Are the interventions being implemented with fidelity?

SEL involves both universal and differentiated instruction informed by data (NPAG, 2019). MTSS teams can use measures of school climate and culture and assessments of student social and emotional competencies (if available) as part of MTSS data-based decision-making, particularly to answer questions related to the effectiveness of the overall system and the design and implementation of tier 1 supports. The cautions detailed in this section about using social and emotional competency assessments for screening and progress monitoring apply to questions related to tier 2 and tier 3 supports.

OTHER STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING SEL INTO DATA-BASED DECISION-MAKING

Meaningfully engage parents and families. Integrating SEL provides MTSS teams with the opportunity to engage in partnership with parents and families as part of the schoolwide decision-making process. Building authentic relationships with families and (to the greatest extent possible) including their perspectives and voices into decision-making for their child creates an inclusive climate where families feel valued.

Focus on SEL competencies of adult decision makers. In order for integrated SEL and MTSS to be equitable, educators—the ones making the decisions—must be aware of their own lived experiences, biases, and mindset when interpreting data and making decisions. Objectively reflecting on the data and owning their role in student outcomes are critical steps toward educators making decisions that are equitable and impactful for students, families, and staff.

Empower students to understand the data and decisions that impact their learning. When students are able to have ownership of their data, motivation and engagement are increased (Dyer, 2016; Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). They feel empowered to set goals, persevere, seek support when needed, and become more self-aware, independent learners.

In the brief, [Making SEL Assessment Work: Ten Practitioner Beliefs](#), the National Practitioner Advisory Group on Using Data to Inspire SEL Practice (NPAG, 2019) outlined a statement on its beliefs about SEL assessment and the cautions that should be considered. Collectively, the group articulated that assessment is a critical part of effective SEL programming and implementation; in fact, it highlights the value of SEL assessments in painting a more comprehensive picture of student social and emotional development. However, the key to effective assessment of social and emotional competencies lies in using a continuous-improvement lens and understanding that SEL assessment is meant to be used in conjunction with other schoolwide data and should be used to develop and improve programming and services, not to sort and identify individual student needs (NPAG, 2019).

MITIGATING BIAS & APPRECIATING DIVERSITY

Use of culturally responsive assessments as part of the universal screening process is encouraged. Assessment tools should be both linguistically and culturally appropriate for the student population, which ensures that decision making is based on strong, accurate data.

Data-based decision-making is more equitable when schools support and strengthen the SEL competencies of the adults who are making decisions.

When collecting and analyzing schoolwide data, educators and leaders can leverage self-awareness to recognize and interrupt personal bias and ways of thinking that may create a barrier when analyzing data. Drawing on responsible decision-making skills, staff can take a critical look at data with an eye toward groups of students who may be not well served. During data-based decision-making meetings, teams have the opportunity to challenge their assumptions and make programmatic decisions based on needs identified in their data. Data may include screening data, typically used in MTSS, as well as social and emotional self-assessments or school climate surveys to get a more comprehensive view of students' experiences and needs.

INFUSING SEL INTO DATA-BASED DECISION MAKING

While integration of SEL into tiers of support—particularly universal tier 1 supports—may be a familiar concept to education leaders and practitioners, there is less consensus related to integration into other aspects of the MTSS framework—particularly those related to assessment. Within MTSS, general assessment data (e.g., from surveys), including assessment data on SEL and school climate to enhance programming at Tier 1, can provide important information about student progress, effectiveness of programs and approaches, and areas for improvement (see [Nevada System for Assessing School Climate and SEL](#)). SEL assessments can be very useful for monitoring student progress toward intervention goals. However, this toolkit does not recommend using universal screeners for SEL when the purpose of screening is to identify students for intervention or treatment.

UNIVERSAL SCREENING & SEL

Within an MTSS framework, screening occurs at the school level for both academic and behavioral skills and includes assessment of all learners for the following purposes:

- 1. Prevention:** Both SEL and MTSS are preventive and proactive frameworks. In MTSS, universal screening allows schools to identify student strengths and flag those children who may need additional targeted supports. When students are not meeting grade-level standards or a benchmark on a high-stakes assessment, this indicates an area where support can be provided immediately so students can gain the skills they need to succeed. Universal screening tools should meet [technical standards](#) to reduce the potential for false positives or false negatives. Because of these complexities, it is important for educational teams to ensure personnel are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to support accurate data collection and interpretation.
- 2. Continuous improvement:** Data on SEL and school climate may provide district teams with guidance on areas in need of improvement. District and school teams may use screening data to determine the effectiveness of the overall system and make decisions about program improvement and curriculum, innovation and sustainability, allocation of resources, and equitable services and supports across schools. School teams may use screening data to review school- and grade-level trends; monitor the effectiveness of schoolwide curriculum, including SEL programs and supports; identify areas of need; and provide guidance on how to set measurable schoolwide goals.

A CAUTION ABOUT SCREENING

Screening for social and emotional competency is an emerging field of study and an activity that should be considered with caution. This toolkit advises against using assessments of social and emotional competencies for universal screening within an MTSS framework at this time—particularly for the second purpose of identifying students who may need additional supports for the purposes of diagnosis and intervention. In addition to the concern regarding placing students into tiers because of perceived deficiencies in social and emotional competencies discussed above, social and emotional competency assessments are not validated for the purpose of screening. Schoolwide data should be used to (a) inform programmatic improvements over time, (b) better understand the climate and conditions for learning, and (c) ensure that young people are developing the SEL skills they need to be successful in school and in life.

A Few Recommendations About Screening:

One way that SEL can and should be integrated within universal screening is supporting the development of [social and emotional competencies](#) such as self-awareness and responsible decision-making in the adults who are selecting and administering screening assessments and interpreting screening data. Adults have the opportunity to demonstrate self-awareness when collecting and reviewing screening data and responsible decision-making when analyzing screening data.

Schools should continue to assess for social, emotional and behavioral issues in students. Educators and caring adults should be on the lookout for students experiencing social, emotional and behavioral difficulty. A number of valid, reliable tools have been designed to empower adults to identify and diagnose emotional and behavioral issues. These tools should give educators the information needed to provide appropriate levels of care for students (J. Taylor & Read, 2019).

For more information about screening and SEL, see [here](#).

MEASURING GROWTH OVER TIME

Given that social and emotional competencies develop over time as students mature, assessments of student social and emotional competencies should be sensitive to students' lived experiences and their developmental stage, rather than using normed measures based on a limited sample (NPAG, 2019). Within MTSS, formal *progress monitoring* is the use of formative assessment data collected *during* learning to help teachers understand whether students are responding to what they are teaching. While educators continuously monitor students' learning and development of academic, social, emotional and behavioral competencies, they typically only engage in progress monitoring (as conceptualized within an MTSS framework) for students receiving tier 2 or 3 academic or behavioral interventions (which may integrate SEL).

PROGRESS MONITORING & SEL

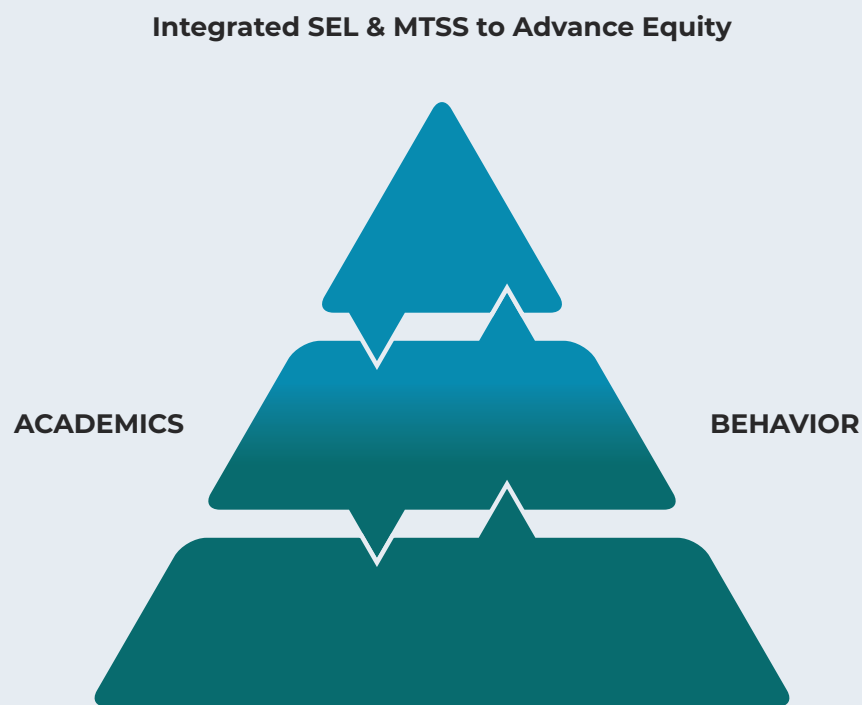
When selecting progress monitoring tools in MTSS, teams consider student needs (cultural, linguistic) and strengths, context, and priorities as well as the technical adequacy of the measures. Given this, formal (i.e., psychometrically valid and reliable) progress monitoring of social and emotional competencies is not recommended; instead, educators are encouraged to informally measure and monitor student progress on their use of social and emotional skills and provide feedback to help students become independent.

The goal of formal progress monitoring in MTSS is to assess students' performance, to quantify students' rate of improvement or responsiveness to instruction or intervention, and to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction using valid and reliable measures. Ongoing, monitoring of student social and emotional learning and development is done through formative assessment of social and emotional competencies throughout the school day as educators observe and interact with students. Additionally, educators can promote and encourage students' use of social and emotional competencies such as self-awareness and self-management while completing formative assessments—both informal and formal.

EVIDENCE OF EQUITABLE, INTEGRATED SEL & MTSS

How will system leaders know when SEL has been successfully integrated into MTSS to advance equity? Each of the following outcomes provides evidence of successful integration. These outcomes, listed in Figure 3 below, are observable and measurable by looking at the **policies and practices that are in place** and how well they are being implemented, as well as the **teaching and learning conditions** that adults and students are experiencing.

FIGURE 3. EVIDENCE OF SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION



Systems change to transform learning environments to promote positive school climate that addresses inequities, injustice, and student supports to build resilience.

Equity focused, systemic SEL in all tiered supports.

Assets-based mindsets, beliefs and practices.

Equitable access to high-quality and rigorous instruction and positive outcomes for all students.

Awareness and strategies to reduce bias-based beliefs and improve value-based policies and practices.

EVIDENCE OF EQUITABLE, INTEGRATED SEL & MTSS

KEY IDEAS: SEL IN MTSS

- Implement SEL programs and practices as foundational, tier 1 supports.
- Reinforce social and emotional competencies and integrate SEL practices at tiers 2 and 3.
- Avoid “tiering” SEL based on a perception of deficiencies in students’ social and emotional competencies.
- Use measures of school climate and culture and assessments of students’ social and emotional competencies (if available) as part of MTSS data-based decision-making—particularly regarding the design and implementation of tier 1 supports.
- Avoid using assessments of students’ social and emotional competencies for the purpose of universal screening or formal progress monitoring within an MTSS framework.

KEY RESOURCES



[Are You Ready to Assess Social and Emotional Learning and Development?](#) (AIR)

[Guide on Measuring School Climate and Social Emotional Development](#) (CCSSO)

[Integrate Student Supports With Schoolwide SEL](#) in the [Guide to Schoolwide SEL](#) (CASEL)

[MTSS Fidelity Rubric](#) and [Essential Components](#) (MTSS Center at AIR)

[MTSS for All: Including Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities](#)

[Program Guides](#) (CASEL)

[SEL Assessment Guide](#) (CASEL)

[SEL Integration Approach](#) (TransformEd)

REVIEW & REFLECT



State and district teams - Use the following reflection questions to connect learning to your work with SEL and MTSS:

What are other examples of how SEL might be integrated across tiers of support?

What measures of school climate and culture are currently in use in your state or district? How might those measures be used to support data-based decision-making in an MTSS framework?

What is the difference between a social and emotional competency assessment and a behavioral screener?

4

HOW CAN STATE & DISTRICT LEADERS GET STARTED?

To effectively integrate equity-focused SEL within MTSS, states and districts should engage in a *strategic alignment and coherence process* that addresses existing cross-division silos that can lead to fragmentation of systems and ultimately diminished outcomes for students. The purpose of this section is to explore how state and district leaders can bring intra-agency stakeholders together to ensure cross-divisional alignment with existing priorities, systems, and practices to prioritize SEL and whole-child development for all students to create systems change at scale. The guidance is informed by lessons learned and promising practices from states that were engaged in the CoP and rests on the conditions that need to be in place to facilitate the integration of SEL within MTSS to advance equity.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION

The following are the optimal set of conditions the authors recommend be in place to support successful integration. The conditions are grounded in both research on implementation science and practical wisdom gained through the work of integration by states and districts.

- **Strong leadership** to prioritize and support the work
- **Collaboration** across and within departments and offices (e.g., at the state level, collaboration across divisions within the SEA and collaboration between the SEA and other state agencies)
- **Clear vision and a shared understanding** to guide the teams in their integration efforts
- **Systemic implementation** grounded in the principles of implementation science
- **Professional development** to build the capacity of those responsible for implementation of SEL with an MTSS framework.
- **Partnerships with students, families, and communities** to ensure that systems, policies, and practices are culturally responsive and to reinforce and sustain efforts
- **Culture of data-driven decision-making** to yield sound decisions and support continuous improvement

INTENTIONAL INTEGRATION-PLANNING TO SUPPORT THE WHOLE CHILD

Systems that meet the needs of the whole child are not created with a single, narrow program or initiative, but instead stem from an integrated set of supports (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2021). While this toolkit focuses on integrating SEL within an MTSS framework, the alignment and coherence process described is relevant to the integration of other whole-child approaches and is also informed by lessons learned from prior integration efforts.

In their book on integrating RTI and PBIS, McIntosh and Goodman (2016) recommend that leaders start integration-planning slowly and intentionally, being mindful of capacity issues and “initiative overload” that commonly besets leaders. State and district leaders often wear many hats and may suffer from initiative fatigue, so it is important to have a clear plan for integration and make sure that all stakeholders are aware of and have bought into the plan. Having a clear plan for integration ensures that leaders know when and where to focus their attention and efforts.

System leaders who are beginning this process should consider whether additional whole-child approaches should be included in integration planning.

Read more about integrating whole-child approaches:

- [Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Approaches: Guidance from the Field](#) (Hoover et al., 2019)
- [Restorative Practices and SEL Alignment](#) (CASEL and International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2020)
- [Trauma-Sensitive Schools and Social and Emotional Learning: An Integration](#) (Osher et al., 2021)
- [Serving the Whole Person: An Alignment and Coherence Guide for State Education Agencies](#) (Walrond & Romer, 2021a)
- [Serving the Whole Person: An Alignment and Coherence Guide for Local Education Agencies](#) (Walrond, 2021)

ROADMAP FOR ALIGNMENT & COHERENCE

The objective for SEAs participating in the CoP was to facilitate collaboration across divisions and offices to ensure intra-agency alignment with existing priorities, systems, and practices and ultimately provide coherent messaging and support to districts and schools to prioritize SEL and whole-child development. The absence of alignment can result in fragmentation of systems across organizations, which can lead to less-effective decisions and competing priorities that stretch capabilities.

Alignment is a bottom-up process that involves all divisions within an SEA or LEA to arrive at a vision and shared understanding by linking an SEA's or LEA's structure and resources with its strategic plan to operate more efficiently and achieve better outcomes. Organizations often confuse alignment—making sure things are in logical order—with coherence—the emotional state of grasping the clear meaning of a phenomenon ([Fullan & Kirtman, ACSD 2021](#)). SEA and LEA leadership needs to find the glue that will increase coherence of state efforts to build a clear path to improve learning in demonstrable ways (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019).

CONNECTING TO IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE

The alignment and coherence process can be situated within the [stages of implementation](#), based in implementation science—primarily in the exploration and installation stages. States and districts should draw on implementation science guidance and resources as they move from the initial alignment and coherence process to full integration and implementation. Organizations should also consider their readiness to implement. For more information check out AIR's [Ready to Assess](#) Brief and Toolkit.

THE HOW: ALIGNMENT & COHERENCE IN ACTION

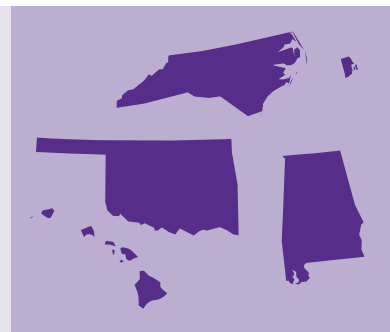
Knowing how to go about the alignment and coherence process is just as important as what you want to achieve. The following is the alignment and coherence process followed by the nine states in the CoP with links to supporting tools and resources.

STEP 1: Convene a Team of Diverse Stakeholders

To engage in the alignment and coherence process, it is important for SEAs and LEAs to bring together a diverse team of stakeholders from within the agency to allow their voices to be heard and to solicit strategic buy-in resulting in alignment with other initiatives. Given the interconnected nature of SEL and MTSS, the work does not necessarily reside in one department or agency; instead, it should be integrated into work streams within and even across agencies. To bring a diverse team to the table, SEAs and LEAs should brainstorm innovative ways to recruit and engage with stakeholders within the agency as well as stakeholders from other youth-serving agencies and ensure the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders are defined and communicated.

State Spotlight: [Alabama](#), [Hawai'i](#), [North Carolina](#), [Oklahoma](#), and [Rhode Island](#)

Involvement in the CoP provided these states the opportunity to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders to begin the process of bringing alignment and coherence to SEL within MTSS. The states reported that this was the first time they “had the right people at the table” to strengthen their SEL/MTSS work.



“Coming together is a beginning;
keeping together is progress;
working together is success.”

— EDWARD EVERETT HALE

THE HOW: ALIGNMENT & COHERENCE IN ACTION

STEP 2: Conduct a Self-Assessment

Before identifying measurable goals and objectives, it is important for SEAs and LEAs to evaluate current policies and practices to identify gaps in alignment with existing priorities, systems, and practices (see sidebar). States and districts should begin with a self-assessment using statewide achievement data, school climate data, and other measures. The [self-assessment tool](#) will guide teams in making decisions about whether to keep current policies and practices, modify them, stop using them, or add other efforts.

State Spotlight: Michigan

Michigan created the MDE MTSS Practice Profile to support alignment of policies and practices for the whole child (cognitive, physical, behavioral, social, and emotional). When completing the state self-assessment, the team identified a failure to continue the integration work established by the Practice Profile. To address the root cause of this challenge, MDE's identified priority objective was to develop a proof of concept on how to integrate SEL, PBIS, and MTSS to avoid potential challenges. Check out the [Michigan Practice Profile](#).



TAKING STOCK OF CURRENT INITIATIVES

Most educational systems attempt to engage in numerous implementation efforts at once. Although this is understandable, it can be problematic. When too many initiatives are implemented, stakeholders become overwhelmed. Resistance to the different initiatives becomes prominent. Further, stakeholders become confused about the focus of the overall educational system, especially when the various initiatives hold conflicting goals or require resources to be pulled from one area to another area (Locke et al., 2019; Malen et al., 2015). To prevent these reactions when implementing integrated MTSS, conduct an [initiative inventory](#). Completing this task allows leaders and stakeholders to identify the full scope of initiatives that are in place, how integrated MTSS fits within the current landscape, and how to begin streamlining the various implementation efforts to create greater focus and purpose (Lyon & Bruns, 2019). Check out West Ed's alignment and coherence guide for serving the whole person for additional tools and resources on how to conduct an inventory and identify opportunities to further alignment and coherence of state initiatives: [Serving the Whole Person: An Alignment and Coherence Guide for State Education Agencies](#) (Walrond & Romer, 2021a).

THE HOW: ALIGNMENT & COHERENCE IN ACTION

STEP 3: Develop Priority Objectives

To address the biggest areas of need identified in the self-assessment, teams should develop one to three priority objectives ([SMARTIE Goals](#)) that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time bound, and equitable. It is important that there is broad team consensus around these objectives and that the accountable owner for each objective has been identified. Once priority objectives have been identified you can enter them in the [state/district planning template](#).

State Spotlight: Minnesota

Minnesota's priority objective was to develop a common language around SEL, whole child, and MTSS to standardize resources that support MTSS implementation. The high-impact strategy to achieve the priority objective was to involve additional stakeholder groups (e.g., School Counselors Association, Educators for Excellence, Equity Alliance for MN) to engage in the process of developing MTSS resources to ensure consistent messaging that included equity elaborations.



STEP 4: Choose High-Impact Strategies/Action Steps

Once goals and priority objectives are identified, states choose high-impact strategies with action steps to ensure that the priority objectives are met. To be successful, high-impact strategies are methods used to create buy-in and facilitate integration that is aligned with state or district initiatives. State teams participating in the CoP used this [high-impact strategies/action planning tool](#) to draft specific tasks, timelines, and evidence needed to evaluate strategies and determine whether they were in fact high impact. States and districts should also engage in goodness of fit or evaluation of activities to ensure that the strategies chosen are feasible given their context. The [high-impact strategies evaluation matrix](#) can be used to determine the extent to which strategies are aligned with priority objectives and state or local capabilities. Once high-impact strategies/action steps have been finalized they can be entered in the [state/district planning template](#).

State Spotlight: Oklahoma

To ensure the achievement of priority objectives, Oklahoma developed SEL competencies and accompanying guidance as the high-impact strategy to align with the state's [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) plan and with academic standards to prioritize SEL and whole-child development for all students.



THE HOW: ALIGNMENT & COHERENCE IN ACTION

STEP 5: Develop a Theory of Change (ToC)

A ToC is a methodology for planning, participation, and evaluation that promotes social change. A ToC is developed to inform planning and articulate how an initiative leads to both short- and long-term goals and then maps backward to identify necessary preconditions. Use this [ToC planning tool](#) to explain how priority objectives and high-impact strategies support the ToC to advance equity. The ToC should include a data-based continuous improvement process as described in the final step. The ToC should also be recorded in the state/district planning tool.

State Spotlight: Virginia

To fully integrate SEL within MTSS and to support the state's objective to build capacity of its tiered system of support ([VTSS](#)), Virginia developed the following ToC: "If we continuously report data on the implementation process and outcomes related to SEL standards, we will be able to identify the required resources for divisions to implement SEL standards to help inform the need for equitable funding."



STEP 6: Community Engagement & Communication

One important step in any initiative is to increase capacity to engage the community and ensure that all stakeholders have a voice and a role in decision-making. This step is critical to ensuring that the integration plan is culturally competent and relevant for the needs of the local community. This step ensures that the plan is inclusive of the diverse community, and that they can advocate for their needs and adapt the plan to reflect those needs. Engaging the community early also ensures buy-in, which can help with implementation and sustainability of SEL in MTSS. You can use the [communication and engagement tool](#) developed for the project or the Implementation Research Network [communication protocol](#) to establish consistent and transparent communication and feedback from stakeholders.

State Spotlight: Hawai'i

Through a widespread community process of dialogue, feedback, and cocreation, the Hawai'i Department of Education developed a framework of outcomes that reflects the Department of Education's core values and beliefs in action throughout the public educational system of Hawai'i. Nā Hopena A`o (HĀ) more fully realizes the importance of a kind of culture and environment necessary for HĀ to thrive and bring life to learning. Underlying these outcomes is the belief that students need both SEL skills and academic mindsets to succeed in college, careers, and communities locally and globally.



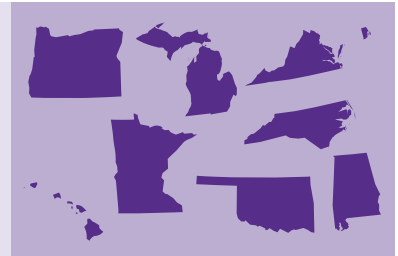
THE HOW: ALIGNMENT & COHERENCE IN ACTION

STEP 7: Plan for Continuous Improvement

Finally, teams should develop a plan for continuous evaluation and improvement. Analyzing data to determine whether the initiative was effective and whether all students, schools, and districts are benefitting from equity-focused SEL within MTSS is key for continuous improvement. Continuous improvement also ensures that alignment and coherence receive ongoing attention and recalibration to ensure the integration work stays aligned and coherent. Examples of data to include in the analysis are school climate data, MTSS implementation data, and SEL schoolwide assessment data. CASEL has developed a [continuous improvement template](#) and a [data reflection protocol](#) for schools and districts to engage in continuous improvement. Integrating SEL into MTSS is likely a multiyear undertaking; implementation research suggests that implementing any new initiative takes at least 3 to 5 years (Fixsen et al., 2005).

State Spotlights: Community of Practice

CASEL and CCSSO have compiled brief snapshots of all the states that participated in the 9-month CoP to illustrate initial steps states are taking to integrate SEL into MTSS. This collection of state snapshots can be accessed [here](#).



State Spotlight: Oregon

Oregon's involvement in the community of practice brought them to an inflection point about how the state should enter into right relationship with communities, especially those that have been underserved, and validated the long-term commitment that the Oregon Department of Education and other state agencies are organizing around developing a system of care that facilitates systems change through aligned services, policies and procedures that will lead to improved access and health for all school communities.



KEY RESOURCES



[Coherence Lab Fellowship Framework](#)
(Aspen Institute, CCSSO, and Education First)

[Implementation Science Resource Library](#)
(National Implementation Research Network)

[Reimagining Excellence: A Blueprint for Integrating Social and Emotional Well-Being and Academic Excellence In Schools](#) (CISELLS, Region 13 Comprehensive Center, and National Center on Systemic Improvement)

REVIEW & REFLECT



State and district teams - Use the following reflection questions to connect learning to your work with SEL and MTSS:

What have you learned from prior cross-departmental efforts to integrate frameworks that might inform how you approach the alignment and coherence process?

Who needs to be involved in the alignment and coherence process to ensure a diverse group of stakeholders is represented that can speak to the work?

5

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

SEL and MTSS each have established bodies of evidence cultivated and refined over years of implementation in a variety of contexts. Education leaders embarking on the path to intentional integration of SEL into MTSS are drawing on this evidence but also charting new territory. The following are considerations to inform next steps for the field.

1. Keep equity at the center.

The states participating in the CoP came to this work because of a belief that it would push systems to yield more equitable outcomes. As the work progressed and state teams grappled with the details of the work, the participants pressed the project partners and one another to maintain a focus on equity above all.

2. Consider how integrating SEL into MTSS can support restart & recovery plans.

The American Rescue Plan (ARP) and preceding COVID relief bills provide funding to states and districts to support—among other things—evidence-based interventions to accelerate learning that address students' social, emotional, and academic needs (see [webinar](#) and [brief](#) from CASEL on using ARP funding to invest in SEL). An integrated MTSS framework can help to efficiently organize and align supports and ensure that decisions are grounded in data. The U.S. Department of Education's [FAQ on the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Programs](#) notes that ESSER funds may be used to provide professional development/training that increases teachers' and staff's awareness of mental health literacy and to integrate mental health strategies and interventions into MTSS. CCSSO and the Healthy Schools Campaign developed a [guide for states on leveraging COVID relief funding and Medicaid to support student wellbeing and connection](#) that includes MTSS and SEL.

3. Take action to implement new policies & practices.

This toolkit provides state and district leaders with foundational tools to begin the alignment and coherence process; it is up to state and local systems to put integration plans into action. Established federal programs such as the School Climate Transformation Grant, Project AWARE, State Professional Development Grants, and Institute of Education Sciences research grants as well as the new federal relief funds referenced above offer potential funding for systems to move from planning and policy design to implementation.

4. Gather, share, and use evidence about what works in which contexts.

Given that most state and local systems are early in their journey to integrate SEL into MTSS, there are ample opportunities to collect and analyze data to inform continuous improvement and build an evidence base for the field. Consider establishing networked improvement communities or research partnerships—for example, through the federally funded [Regional Educational Laboratories](#)—to develop and carry out a research agenda.

The nine states in this initiative are trailblazers in advancing the important work of integrating SEL into MTSS. The COVID-19 pandemic, increasing focus on systemic inequities, and new federal investments that prioritize whole-child supports offer an important opportunity for state and district leaders to build and refine integrated systems of support. We expect that in the coming decade we will see new innovations and lessons learned from the field as our nation's educational leaders develop, test, and refine models for integrating SEL into MTSS to achieve more equitable outcomes for *all* students—regardless of geography, background, race, gender, income, and ability levels.

GLOSSARY

Culturally Competent Approaches recognize the cultural grounding of teachers' and service providers' views, behaviors, and methods; acknowledge the power of language and the diverse communication styles of students and their families; address culturally based definitions of family networks and of showing respect; view family and community as critical parts of a student's support system; and demonstrate a willingness and ability to draw on community-based values, traditions, customs, and resources (Frances & Osher, 2018).

Data-based Decision-making, within an MTSS framework, occurs at all levels of MTSS implementation, from individual students to the district level. MTSS teams use screening and progress monitoring data to make decisions about instruction, movement within the multi-level prevention system, intensification of instruction and supports, and identification of students with disabilities (in accordance with state law). Teams use implementation data to evaluate the extent to which their assessments, interventions, and supports have been implemented as intended and identify areas of improvement (MTSS Center, 2021a).

Educational Equity means that every student has access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background, and/or family income (Aspen Education and Society Program & CCSSO, 2017).

Mental Health is a state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioral adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life (American Psychological Association, 2020).

A **Multi-level Prevention System**, within an MTSS framework, includes three tiers of intensity for instruction, intervention, and supports. Tier 1 includes high-quality, schoolwide academic, social, emotional, and behavioral programming and supports designed to meet the needs of all students. At tier 2, schools provide small-group, standardized academic interventions or targeted behavioral or mental health supports using validated intervention programs to support students identified as at risk. Tier 3 includes intensive intervention for students not responding to tier 2 through instruction and supports that are intensified and individualized based on students' needs. At all levels, attention should be on selection of evidence-based practices and fidelity of implementation, with consideration for cultural and linguistic responsiveness and recognition of student strengths (MTSS Center, 2021b).

A **Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)** is a framework that integrates data and instruction within a multilevel prevention system to maximize students' achievement and support students' social, emotional, and behavior needs from a strengths-based perspective (MTSS Center, 2021e). An MTSS framework has four essential elements: screening, progress monitoring, data-based decision-making, and a multi-level prevention system.

Progress Monitoring, within an MTSS framework, is used to assess students' performance, to quantify students' rate of improvement or responsiveness to instruction or intervention, and to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction using valid and reliable measures. In addition, across all levels of the system, sites monitor progress to provide feedback for improvement. With progress monitoring, MTSS teams use valid and reliable tools and focus on fidelity of implementation for interventions, with consideration for cultural and linguistic responsiveness and recognition of students' strengths (MTSS Center, 2021e).

Restorative Practices is an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as develop social connections within communities. In schools, restorative practices help to create a trusting environment by giving both students and adults an opportunity to make positive choices and interact respectfully in the classroom and throughout the school (CASEL and International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2020).

GLOSSARY

Schoolwide SEL engages the entire school community in creating caring, motivating, and equitable learning environments that promote social, emotional, and academic growth (CASEL, 2021a).

Social and Emotional Competencies are the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that children and adults develop by engaging in the SEL process; CASEL defines five areas of competence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2021d).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2021c).

Student Social and Emotional Competence Assessments are methods of measuring and quantifying students' level of social and emotional competence and include self-report, teacher-completed rating scales, direct assessment, and other methods (Assessment Work Group, 2019).

Systemic SEL is an approach to creating equitable learning conditions that actively involve all Pre-K to Grade 12 students in learning and practicing social, emotional, and academic competencies. These equitable learning conditions require aligned policies, resources, and actions at state and district levels that encourage local schools and communities to build the personal and professional capacities of adults to implement and continuously improve evidence-based programs and practices; create an inclusive culture that fosters caring relationships and youth voice, agency, and character; and support coordinated school-family-community partnerships to enhance student development (Mahoney et al., 2020).

Trauma-sensitive Schools are schools in which all aspects of the educational environment—from workforce training to engagement with students and families to procedures and policies—are grounded in an understanding of trauma and its impact and are designed to promote resilience for all (Guarino & Chagnon, 2018).

Universal Screening, within an MTSS framework, uses a systematic process for identifying students who may be at risk for poor learning outcomes. With screening, MTSS teams select valid and reliable indicators, monitor and ensure fidelity of implementation, and use data to identify students who are at risk and improve tier 1 implementation and impact. The screening process should reflect cultural and linguistic responsiveness and recognition of students' needs and strengths (MTSS Center, 2021d).

Whole-child approaches consider the full range of children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs (Science of Learning and Development, 2020).

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