

Advancing Teacher Well-Being Through SEL in Oakland Unified

Kyalamboka Brown, Stanford University; Maria E. Hyler, Learning Policy Institute

About EdPrepLab

EdPrepLab, an initiative of the Learning Policy Institute and Bank Street Graduate School of Education, aims to strengthen educator preparation by supporting learning and sharing research and practices among programs, school districts, and policymakers. EdPrepLab supports programs and informs policies that incorporate the science of learning and development to enable deeper learning and equity, working to expand these approaches nationally and internationally.

About This Brief

This brief describes Oakland Unified School District's efforts aimed at supporting the social and emotional learning (SEL) and well-being of its educators. In alignment with the science of learning and development principles, it affirms the need for educator SEL, provides insights into what this entails for educators, shares how Oakland Unified School District has implemented educator SEL, and concludes with a forward-looking perspective on addressing adult well-being through transformative SEL.

Introduction

Situated in California, the [Oakland Unified School District](#) (OUSD) encompasses 85 schools predominantly serving Black and Latino/a students and students from low-income households. In 2012, district administrators partnered with the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#) (CASEL) to prioritize the well-being needs of its 35,000 students and 2,100 faculty and staff members. Subsequently, OUSD established a dedicated Social Emotional Learning (SEL) department, entrusted with integrating SEL principles into classrooms, meeting spaces, and various contexts throughout the district. This strategic initiative emerged from a broader plan to transition all schools within the district into [community schools](#), fostering intentional design to address the social and emotional well-being of children and adults.

This brief describes OUSD's efforts aimed at supporting the SEL and well-being of its educators. Aligning with the science of learning and development (SoLD) principles, this brief affirms the need for educator SEL, shares how OUSD has implemented educator SEL, and concludes with a forward-looking perspective on addressing adult well-being through transformative SEL in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and broader societal considerations.

The Case for Educator SEL

The focus on SEL for students has garnered growing attention in recent years.¹ Yet the SEL of educators in schools is frequently neglected, despite the pivotal role teachers play in supporting the

well-being of students² and the importance of well-being on teachers' levels of commitment, motivation, and resilience.³ Research shows that the social and emotional needs of both students and educators can be supported through positive relational connections.⁴ SoLD highlights the importance of educators learning and collaborating within supportive, developmental relationships embedded in communities of practice. Teachers experience significant advantages when participating in such relationships, and it is crucial to establish a whole-school commitment to the ongoing support of teachers and teaching.⁵ This commitment includes creating nurturing environments with a dedicated emphasis on SEL and wellness for educators.

OUSD has prioritized a strategic approach to supporting educators' SEL. Former OUSD SEL Director Sonny Kim emphasized that classrooms are inherently social and emotional spaces, making it impossible to separate teacher SEL from student SEL. "If we're focused on developing the students' social, emotional, and academic growth and development, we have to attend to the adult—to the teacher." OUSD challenged the notion that educators do not need system-level SEL support and affirmed the role that a school district can play in facilitating adult well-being. Kim noted the tendency of educational systems to place the responsibility for wellness exclusively on the individual and commented:

We tend to focus on individual self-care so much that your wellness is dependent on yourself [alone], and [we are] not seeing the impact that a system like a school district can have and how much of our wellness is really defined and shaped by the organization—the structure and systems of structures [and] the culture of that organization.

OUSD operates from the belief that well-being is a shared responsibility across the school community. As Mara Larsen, OUSD Wellness Director, explained, "We don't want our staff to feel like it's entirely on you to take care of yourself." From this perspective, OUSD formulated an approach, generated resources, and executed initiatives designed to directly support educator SEL.

Defining Educator SEL

OUSD adopted CASEL's framework to define SEL and to clearly articulate the competencies associated with adult SEL. The use of a recognized framework established a shared language and understanding across the district, which supported more consistent communication and implementation of SEL strategies for both educators and students.

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.⁶

OUSD also integrated the five core SEL competencies identified in CASEL's framework into its districtwide SEL efforts: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making. As illustrated in the CASEL Wheel (see Figure 1), these competencies were understood to develop within the interconnected environments of classrooms, schools, families, and communities.⁷ Kim described them as “life skills that really support our well-being.”

Figure 1. CASEL Wheel



Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (n.d.). *What is the CASEL Framework?* (accessed 02/22/2026).

Figure 2. OUSD PreK-Adult Social and Emotional Learning Standards

Anchor Standard	Learning Standard	
1 Self-Awareness Develop and demonstrate self awareness skills to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify personal, cultural, and linguistic assets • Identify prejudices and biases towards people different than oneself • Understand the connections between one's emotions, social contexts and identity • Demonstrate an accurate self-concept based on one's strengths and challenges • Identify when help is needed and who can provide it 	1A	Individual demonstrates an understanding of one's emotions.
	1B	Individual demonstrates knowledge of personal strengths, challenges, cultural, linguistic assets, and aspirations.
	1C	Individual demonstrates awareness of personal rights and responsibilities.
	1D	Individual demonstrates an awareness of when help is needed and who can provide it.
2 Self-Management Develop and demonstrate self-management skills to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulate one's emotions and behaviors in contexts with people different than oneself • Motivate oneself to set and achieve goals 	2A	Individual demonstrates the skills to manage and express one's emotions, thoughts, impulses and stress in constructive ways.
	2B	Individual demonstrates the skills to set, monitor, adapt, achieve, and evaluate goals.
3 Social Awareness Develop and demonstrate social awareness skills to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish and maintain healthy interactions and relationships across diverse communities • Embrace diversity and take the perspectives of people different from oneself • Demonstrate empathy for people similar to and different from oneself 	3A	Individual demonstrates empathy for other people's emotions, perspectives, cultures, languages, and histories.
	3B	Individual contributes productively to one's school, workplace, and community.
	3C	Individual demonstrates an awareness and respect for one's similarities and differences with others.
	3D	Individual recognizes leadership capacity in themselves and others.
4 Relationship Skills Develop and demonstrate relationship skills to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relate to people similar to and different than oneself • Communicate clearly and effectively • Build, establish and maintain healthy relationships 	4A	Individual uses a range of communication skills to interact effectively with individuals of diverse backgrounds, abilities, languages, and lifestyles.
	4B	Individual cultivates constructive relationships with individuals of diverse backgrounds, abilities, languages, and lifestyles.
	4C	Individual demonstrates the skills to respectfully engage in and resolve interpersonal conflicts in various contexts.
5 Responsible Decision Making Develop and demonstrate responsible decision making skills to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solve effectively while being respectful of people similar to and different from oneself • Behave responsibly in personal, professional, and community contexts • Make constructive and respectful choices that consider the well-being of self and others 	5A	Individual considers the well-being of self and others when making decisions.
	5B	Individual uses a systematic approach to decision making in a variety of situations.
	5C	Individual applies problem-solving skills to engage responsibly in a variety of situations.

Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2015).

In 2015, OUSD identified the need for a tool to assess the development of SEL competencies. In response, administrators established social and emotional standards applicable across all learning contexts for both children and adults (see [Figure 2](#)). These standards functioned as a guide for SEL, in much the same way that content standards guided academic learning across the district. The OUSD PreK-Adult SEL Standards were later endorsed by CASEL and adopted by districts nationwide. Kim noted that, unlike many SEL initiatives, which focus solely on students, OUSD intentionally applies SEL standards to all adults within the district as well.

Implementing Systematic Educator SEL

OUSD integrated SEL strategies into district practices to address the varied needs of educators. Understanding those needs was a priority, and the district used multiple feedback mechanisms, including an annual staff retention survey that included questions related to educator SEL. In 2019, OUSD conducted a comprehensive listening campaign, which informed an updated strategic plan for adult wellness developed in collaboration with [The Teaching Well](#) (a nonprofit organization focused on educator wellness) and funding from [Kaiser Permanente](#) (a health care organization).

Additionally, OUSD established a team of Lead Learners, who served as SEL-focused teacher leaders within their schools. These educators strengthened their own SEL skills while also assessing the needs of colleagues and organized context-specific supports. Their work included facilitating SEL-focused professional development, incorporating SEL into faculty meetings, and serving as instructional coaches with a focus on teachers' emotional well-being. District administrators supported principals and Lead Learners in adapting SEL strategies to fit their local school contexts.

Incorporating SEL strategies into everyday social settings, including classrooms and meetings, was a key focus of OUSD's approach. In collaboration with CASEL, OUSD developed a tool aimed at implementing systematic SEL in schools. The practices derived from this collaboration are detailed in CASEL's [SEL 3 Signature Practices Playbook: A Tool That Supports Systemic SEL](#), which emphasizes embedding SEL within the broader educational environment rather than treating it as a stand-alone initiative. These practices include the following:

- **Welcoming inclusion activities** are brief, interactive experiences designed to incorporate the voice of each participant into the space. These activities aim to establish connections among participants, fostering an inclusive environment where every perspective is respected and valued. The goal is to create a platform for mutual learning, promoting a sense of inclusion that extends to both the individuals and the collaborative work at hand.

- **Engaging strategies**, including elements such as Brain Breaks and Transition Techniques, inherently integrate SEL. These strategies, which are diverse in complexity and incorporate reflective and processing periods, are facilitated to support individualized learning. The inclusion of SEL principles ensures that these strategies contribute to the emotional and social development of the school community.
- **An optimistic closure** highlights individual and shared understandings of the importance of the work, offering a sense of achievement and fostering forward-thinking support.


The playbook presents group activities for implementing each signature practice, offering sample activities with step-by-step facilitation guidance and a rationale aligned with SEL competencies. For instance, the gallery walk (see [Figure 3](#)), an engaging strategy, promotes SEL competencies such as responsible decision-making and relationship skills by encouraging cooperation and collaborative problem-solving. In addition, the playbook invites educators to design their own activities that reinforce the signature practices and respond to local contexts.


This initiative reflects OUSD's commitment to a holistic system-level approach to SEL that extends beyond individual classrooms to shape the well-being of both educators and students. Across the district, OUSD integrates three SEL signature practices into all meetings and professional development sessions. Acknowledging that educators may arrive at these spaces carrying the effects of challenging experiences, the district emphasizes calming, centering, and focusing routines to enable full participation. Grounded in the view that adult learning requires time and space for intentional reflection, these practices offer answers to what SEL can look like for adults and how it can be embedded into routine professional structures. By prioritizing the well-being of educators through consistent practice, OUSD aims to create an environment conducive to wellness.

Figure 3. Signature Practice Activity

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING


3 SIGNATURE PRACTICES PLAYBOOK

A TOOL THAT SUPPORTS SYSTEMIC SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING



Engaging Strategies


Gallery Walk



Time: 20 minutes or longer if schedule permits

Overview:
Like viewers at a gallery, small groups of participants rotate from poster to poster, stopping to view, discuss, and add ideas at each station.


When and Why:
This brainstorming activity allows small groups to discuss a variety of topics and learn from one another in a short amount of time.



SEL Focus: During this activity, participants will be drawing on **Responsible Decision-Making** skills as they **Problem-solve** with their group and **Relationship Skills** (*Working Cooperatively, Recognizing and Using Supports, Social Engagement*).

Steps:

1. Share an overarching question with the group, such as, "How can we make our school environment safer for students?"
2. Hang posters with headings that relate to the overarching question around the room. For example, for the question "How can we make our school environment safer for students?", the headings might be "Between Classes," "At Dismissal," "During Lunch," etc.
3. Divide participants into small groups, give each group a marker, and direct each group to one of the posters. Explain the overarching question, and what each of the poster topics is.
4. Allow groups to stand at each poster for three to five minutes to share, discuss, and write down their responses to the category.
5. When time is up, ask the groups to rotate clockwise so each group is in front of a new poster to continue the activity. Each group now reads the offerings of the previous authors, using sticky notes to add clarifying questions or comments/compliments. Rotate every three to five minutes, until every group has visited every poster.
6. Next, allow time for individuals to silently walk around the room and read the completed posters, noting ideas that they agree with or that seem like something they'd like to try.
7. Original group revisits their feedback and can add to their poster.



Debrief:
Ask participants from each group to respond to one of the questions or comments they received and share out their favorite idea, an insight, or a proposed next step.

Modifications and Variations:
If space is limited, the "posters" can be sheets of paper that are passed from table to table.

Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2019). *Fundamentals of SEL*. (accessed 02/17/2026).

Transformative SEL

The ongoing challenges and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened educators' feelings of anxiety and stress, emphasizing the urgency of attending to adult SEL in schools.⁸ One OUSD SEED resource specialist described her work engagement since the pandemic as unsustainable, saying:

I was aware that I was not engaging in my work in sustainable ways; I was simply in survival mode, pushing through, trying to get by, and literally telling myself, "I can be a whole human later, during breaks, outside of the 180 instructional days." If I were to do that this year as well, I'm confident that I'd leave Oakland [Unified School District] at the end of it.

District leaders also observed that teachers who began their careers during the pandemic have been particularly vocal about their need for social and emotional support. Soo Hyun Han-Harris, Coordinator of Retention and Employee Development of OUSD, noted:

While there's been a lot of discussion about how and when and who teachers will teach, there's really been less conversation about how teachers themselves have been impacted as people by the pandemic, while they're expected to lessen some of the impacts for students and families and their school communities. ... I believe that conversation really has to be had side by side with conversations about the social-emotional needs of our teachers.

OUSD administrators have continued to examine ways to support educator SEL in response to the pandemic and broader societal issues. In June 2022, the district introduced Transformative SEL to educators, explicitly linking CASEL's five competencies of SEL with the corresponding five focal constructs of Transformative SEL: identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem-solving, and curiosity (see [Table 1](#)).⁹ Introduced through a workshop format, the initiative engaged educators in structured reflection on how dimensions of identity influence their experiences both inside and outside of school. The sessions also prompted examination of agency and power dynamics among educators and students, as well as the design of learning environments that support a sense of belonging.

Survey data indicated that 97% of educators who participated in Transformative SEL workshops reported that these opportunities made their work feel more sustainable or effective and increased their desire and ability to remain in OUSD. One Piedmont Elementary teacher reflected:

Coming together with like-minded folks was lovely, and [it was] helpful to find that I'm not alone and in fact share similar sentiments with many folks who

shared and joined. Taking time to reflect, journal, meditate was helpful to digest what was covered or shared. Self-care is incredibly important. Filling my own cup first can support the work I do with special education youth.

OUSD's use of Transformative SEL illustrates not only the need for educator SEL but also the impact it has on educators' well-being, professional practice, and classroom environments.

Table 1. SEL vs. Transformative SEL

Competencies of SEL	Focal constructs for Transformative SEL	Connecting SEL with Transformative SEL
Self-awareness	Identity	Identity is focal among self-awareness competencies and refers to how students (and adults) view themselves. Identity is multidimensional (e.g., race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, religion, values, interests, etc.), with each dimension having a level of importance and emotional tenor (positive or negative) that may change over time.
Self-management	Agency	Agency is focal among self-management competencies and signifies perceived and actual capacity to effect change through purposeful action.
Social awareness	Belonging	Belonging is focal among social awareness competencies and connotes experiences of acceptance, respect, and inclusion within a group or community.
Relationship skills	Collaborative problem-solving	Collaborative problem-solving is focal among relationship skills competencies and reflects a complex skill set in high demand in our increasingly multifaceted local, national, and global contexts.
Responsible decision-making	Curiosity	Curiosity is focal among responsible decision-making competencies and can animate critical self- and social analysis and action.

Source: Jagers, R. J., Skoog-Hoffman, A., Barthelus, B., & Schlund, J. (2021). Transformative social emotional learning: In pursuit of educational equity and excellence. *American Educator*, 45(2), 12.

Transformative SEL has continued to gain momentum beyond OUSD. Kim's participation in a 2020 California Department of Education SEL work group contributed to the development of resources to support statewide implementation of Transformative SEL. Emphasizing the inseparability of SEL and equity, Kim highlighted the need for SEL to extend beyond individual competence toward a broader social purpose:

You can't talk about SEL without talking about equity. ... Just having socially and emotionally competent individuals—that's not enough. Towards what purpose? How does SEL truly impact or better everyone's lives?

Within OUSD, this orientation continues to shape district efforts. Leaders are advancing SEL implementation by embedding Transformative SEL more fully into existing practices and by developing adult indicators aligned with SEL standards, signaling an ongoing commitment to deepening and sustaining this work.

Conclusion

In response to the growing recognition of the importance of educators' well-being, OUSD has taken deliberate steps to support educator SEL, including:

- establishing districtwide SEL standards,
- creating SEL-focused teacher leader roles,
- implementing the three SEL signature practices,
- developing and reinforcing SEL competencies, and
- integrating Transformative SEL constructs into district practices.

These initiatives are intended to strengthen educator well-being, support retention, enhance professional practice, and advance educational equity.¹⁰ OUSD's approach reflects an understanding that attending to educator SEL alongside student SEL is a necessary condition for meaningful and sustained improvement. By recognizing the interconnected nature of educator and student well-being, the district has sought to create conditions that support both teaching and learning across school contexts.

About the Authors

Kyalamboka Brown is a consultant on the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) Educator Quality team. Brown is committed to supporting both formal and informal teacher education opportunities. Prior to joining LPI, Brown was a high school teacher, an instructor for the Stanford Teacher Education Program (STEP), and a professional development facilitator for the Knowles Teacher Initiative. She also managed mathematics and science secondary curriculum developers and served as a STEM instructional coach. Brown earned a master's degree in Educational Studies from the University of Michigan and a bachelor's in Pure Mathematics from Michigan State University. She is currently a doctoral candidate in Mathematics Education; Education Policy; and Race, Inequality, and Language in Education (RILE) at Stanford University.

Maria E. Hyler serves as the Director of LPI's Washington, DC, office. She directs the EdPrepLab in partnership with Bank Street Graduate School of Education. Prior to taking her position at LPI, Hyler served as an Assistant Professor at the University of Maryland, College Park. She began her career teaching 10th- and 11th-graders in Belmont, CA, where she achieved National Board Certification in Adolescent Young Adult English Language Arts. Hyler received a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from Stanford University, an MEd with a teaching credential from Harvard Graduate School of Education, and a dual degree in English and Africana Studies from Wellesley College.

Endnotes

- 1 Tate Sullivan, E. (2019, May 7). Why social-emotional learning is suddenly in the spotlight. *EdSurge*. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2019-05-07-why-social-emotional-learning-is-suddenly-in-the-spotlight>
- 2 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2021). *2011-2021: 10 years of social and emotional learning in U.S. school districts*. <https://casel.org/cdi-ten-year-report/> (accessed 12/27/2022); Ferren, M. (2021). *Social and emotional supports for educators during and after the pandemic*. Center for American Progress; Graham, A., Powell, M. A., & Truscott, J. (2016). Facilitating student well-being: Relationships do matter. *Educational Research*, 58(4), 366-383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2016.1228841>; Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2017). Social and emotional learning and teachers. *Future of Children*, 27(1), 137-155.
- 3 Hascher, T., & Waber, J. (2021). Teacher well-being: A systematic review of the research literature from the year 2000-2019. *Educational Research Review*, 34, 100411. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2021.100411>
- 4 Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Wojcikiewicz, S. (with Rushing, J.). (2025). *Design principles for teacher preparation: Enacting the science of learning and development*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/115.854>; Graham, A., Powell, M. A., & Truscott, J. (2016). Facilitating student well-being: Relationships do matter. *Educational Research*, 58(4), 366-383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2016.1228841>
- 5 Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Wojcikiewicz, S. (with Rushing, J.). (2025). *Design principles for teacher preparation: Enacting the science of learning and development*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/115.854>

- 6 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.). *Fundamentals of SEL*. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/> (accessed 12/27/2022).
- 7 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.). *Fundamentals of SEL*. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/> (accessed 12/27/2022).
- 8 Schlund, J. (2020). Leveraging social and emotional learning to support adults in the time of COVID-19 [Blog post]. *Learning Policy Institute*. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/leveraging-social-emotional-learning-support-adults-covid-19>
- 9 Jagers, R. J., Skoog-Hoffman, A., Barthelus, B., & Schlund, J. (2021). Transformative social emotional learning: In pursuit of educational equity and excellence. *American Educator*, 45(2), 12.
- 10 Brackett, M., & Cipriano, C. (2020, April 7). Teachers are anxious and overwhelmed. They need SEL now more than ever. *EdSurge*. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-04-07-teachers-are-anxious-and-overwhelmed-they-need-sel-now-more-than-ever>; Currie, L. (2021, July 9). 7 reasons why social-emotional learning is important for teacher wellbeing. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/inspired-ideas-prek-12/7-reasons-why-social-emotional-learning-is-important-for-teacher-wellbeing-52237dd002f4>; Sambursky, V. (2021, October 22). How adult SEL programs can help retain teachers during nationwide shortage. *Endominance*. <https://www.endominance.com/how-adult-sel-programs-can-help-retain-teachers-during-nationwide-shortage/>; Schlund, J., Jagers, R. J., & Schlinger, M. (2020). *Emerging insights on advancing social and emotional learning (SEL) as a lever for equity and excellence*. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2017). Social and emotional learning and teachers. *Future of Children*, 27(1), 137-155.

Acknowledgments

This brief benefited from review by Laura Allen, Professor in the Department of Education at Trinity University, and Desiree Pointer-Mace, Professor of Education at Alverno College. The authors express their gratitude to the Oakland Unified School District staff for sharing their story. They extend special thanks to Mara Larsen, Sonny Kim, and Soo Hyun Han-Harris.

EdPrepLab is supported by the Bezos Family Foundation, Skyline Foundation, W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation, XQ Institute, and Yidan Prize Foundation. Additional core operating support for the Learning Policy Institute is provided by the Heising-Simons Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Sandler Foundation, and MacKenzie Scott. The ideas voiced in this brief are those of the authors and not those of our funders.

Document last revised March 14, 2026