



Funding Social-Emotional Learning at the State Level

Findings and Recommendations to Create Stable, Robust, and Diverse Funding Streams for SEL

Executive Summary

Social-emotional learning (SEL) isn't well supported at the state level. Currently most people point to federal dollars as a way to fund SEL, even though federal funding contributes the least amount to public education budgets. We examined state-level funding streams for SEL in six states: California, Kansas, Ohio, New York, Tennessee, and Texas. These states were chosen based on input from Committee for Children staff and regional diversity. We found that when states fund SEL, they do so through nonrecurring grants, detached from categoricals (state-level grants in specific categories) or state funding formulas, and that the grants tend to be given in broad categories with many possible subcategories that can com-

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pete with SEL, which effectively deprioritizes state-level SEL funding. Based on these findings, we recommend that states move toward incorporating SEL into core educational funding so it can be paid for from more standard, consistent, and reliable funding streams, and also narrow the scope of school climate and safety grants so SEL is one of fewer options to choose from, and is therefore prioritized.

Funding Social-Emotional Learning at the State Level

Currently most people point to federal money as a way to fund SEL,¹ despite the fact that it only makes up about 10 percent of total public education funding.² The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) contains numerous opportunities for SEL funding—Title I, Parts A, C, and D; Title II, Part II; Title IV, Part A; Title VI, Part B, Subparts 1 and 2; and Title VIII. Additionally, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, and Promoting Student Resilience grants offer federal money that can be used for SEL programs³ or educator training.

In contrast, state funding constitutes 47 percent of total public K-12 education spending.⁴ New efforts in education require focused funding in order to be successful over time. SEL then, considered a new effort, should be receiving that kind of focus.

To see whether that's playing out, we took a look at six states—California, Kansas, Ohio, New York, Tennessee and Texas—and examined how they fund SEL at the state level. These states were chosen, based on input from coworkers at Committee for Children, to attain regional diversity and because of interests, questions, and concerns from districts in the states.

Findings

We found that dedicated state-level funding streams for SEL in the states we examined were quite limited. The shortage of dedicated state funding is disappointing, but not surprising. Attention at the state level for SEL is relatively new and still growing. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) State Scorecard, only eight states had adopted SEL Preschool to Grade 12 competencies as of 2017, with another eight projected to come online by the end of 2019.⁵ SEL is not yet a stalwart feature in state policy landscapes. We found the following two factors related to that situation.

First, state funding design is making it harder for new efforts to be successful. States distribute funding to their schools and school systems traditionally through a funding formula ultimately based on student enrollment that generally covers “basic education” costs as defined by the state's constitution. This method is buttressed by state-level allotments of funds to programs in very specific categories—called categoricals—both new and sustained categoricals as a method for state funding appear to be less and less common. SEL funding must come

from more standard, consistent, and reliable financial sources. Funds and grants that do generally cover SEL are often one-time opportunities that don't offer any sustainability. This demonstrates a need to provide a continuing funding stream for SEL, which might be most easily achieved by incorporating it into already established, recurring funds.

Second, SEL must be prioritized by including it in grants with fewer other options to choose from. SEL funding opportunities usually fall under school safety and school climate grants, but because these are broad areas, SEL tends to lose out to other aspects of these topics.

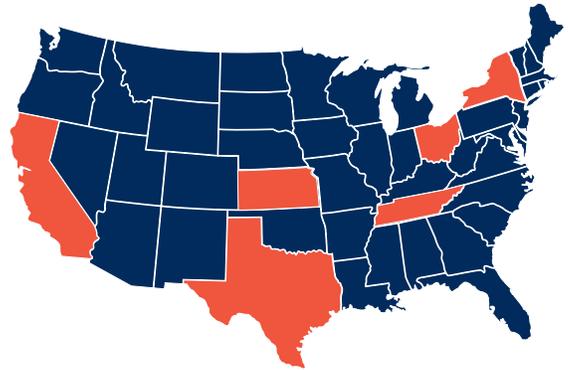
Recommendations

Moving forward, states must create stable, robust, and diverse funding streams for SEL, to better support its implementation and to ensure its enduring presence in schools. We recommend:

1. SEL funding must come from more standard, consistent, and reliable financial sources that provide a recurring funding stream.
 - Move SEL toward being treated as basic education (that is, as part of core spending).
 - Include SEL in state accountability measures (because what gets measured gets funded).
 - Include SEL in intervention strategies under targeted and comprehensive improvement in state accountability systems.⁶
 - Include SEL locally in school improvement plans and school evaluations that are already focused on discipline and climate issues.
2. SEL must be prioritized by narrowing the scope of grants so there are fewer priorities for it to compete with.
 - Since SEL gets lost in grants that allow multiple endeavors to get funding, either reduce the range of things that get funded under these grants or prioritize SEL applicants.

Exploring the Gap: California and Kansas

Two of the states we surveyed—California and Kansas—showed a scarcity of specific social-emotional learning funds. California's education finance system has shifted to favor local control, which has removed state opportunities to dedicate funding for SEL. Kansas is currently focused on funding basic education, which is likely to impede the expansion of state funding, even to state-level initiatives, until a resolution is reached.



California

California's funding system emphasizes local control. This means the state generally doesn't dedicate funds to specific types of programs, and instead allocation happens at the local level. In the 2013–14 school year, California introduced a local control funding formula (LCFF) to replace its previous school finance system. This funding formula provides a uniform foundational amount of money to each district based on average daily attendance, with supplemental funding given based on district demographics. This system gives districts greater flexibility in using the funding.

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The changes in the way funds are distributed also resulted in the removal of categorical programs. Some categoricals that could have supported SEL programming were edtech, School Safety Block Grants, School Safety Consolidated Competitive Grants, and School Community Violence Prevention.⁷ The elimination of these categoricals leaves California without dedicated state-level funds to support SEL programs. This retreat from categoricals isn't surprising. A study by the Center for American Progress found that on average, the use of categorical funding decreased between 2008 and 2013, during the economic downturn. But the fact that states are moving away from categoricals suggests that they're a less reliable means of supporting SEL programming.⁸

Kansas

In contrast, Kansas has established Social-Emotional Character Development (SECD) standards, and the Kansans Can Vision for Education established social-emotional growth as a high priority for the state. The initiative aimed to integrate teaching social-emotional skills into school routines and aligned Kansas' SECD standards with the Kansans Can Competencies to support integration. But although Kansas spent federal money on this effort,⁹ it didn't explicitly allocate state money to the Kansans Can initiative.¹⁰ Kansas has an ongoing legal struggle with basic education funding,¹¹ so this isn't entirely surprising. The SECD standards began with funding from the US Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and have continued through ESSA funding.¹² When the federal money dries up, it's unclear how Kansas will be able to support its SEL goals.

Sorting Out Priorities: Ohio, New York, Tennessee, and Texas

When states do offer grants that can be used to support SEL, their focus tends to be on school safety and climate. Under these bigger umbrella issues, social-emotional programming is often reduced to a footnote. State agencies routinely under-prioritize it. Ohio, New York, and Tennessee all offer competitive grants that can be used to support SEL programs, but none of them emphasizes the importance of social-emotional learning in achieving the larger goal of the grant. Rather than establishing a competitive grant, Texas created a School Safety Allotment that provides funding to all districts based on a formula; this allocation suggests SEL as one option on a much larger list of potential safety measures. As a result, little of this funding is actually used to support SEL.



Ohio

In spring 2018, Ohio passed HB 318, the Supporting Alternatives for Fair Education (SAFE) Act. This act established the Ohio School Climate Grant, which includes a \$2 million appropriation to be divided among eligible applicants. This grant can be used for either Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or evidence- or research-based SEL programs, or it can be used to implement both. However the language of the request for applications emphasizes PBIS only. The request opens with “In Ohio, momentum is building around [PBIS] and the importance of positive school climates to student success.”¹³ The absence of SEL in the background of the request suggests Ohio’s school climate priorities are mostly centered on PBIS. The deadline to apply for this grant was March 2019.¹⁴ At the time of writing, the grants have been awarded, and an additional request for applications (RFA) may develop. According to Ohio PBIS, an office within Ohio’s Department of Education, school districts requested grant funding for various trainings, trauma-informed care, restorative practices, the PBIS PAX Good Behavior Game, sensory rooms, and yoga programs.¹⁵ Although it’s unclear how exactly school districts intend to provide trauma-informed care and restorative practices, this list suggests a lack of focus on SEL programming. Since SEL wasn’t the main goal of the grant, it seems to have been sidelined in implementation.

New York

New York established its Safe and Supportive Schools grants to support initiatives for school climate improvements in economically disadvantaged schools. The budget includes \$2 million; \$400,000 is for a Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center, and 16 districts receive \$100,000 each. The purpose of these grants is for districts to “promote positive school climate; improve parent and student engagement; and reduce violence and incidences of bullying, harassment, and discrimination.”¹⁶ Like the Ohio grant, this grant serves an umbrella issue—school climate—over SEL specifically, which opens the door for funding to be used for non-SEL purposes. Although this grant is conducive to supporting SEL, it’s unclear if funds were actually spent on SEL programming.

Sustainability in Ohio and New York

As discussed above, both Ohio and New York offer school climate grants that can be used for SEL programs. However, both states secured these grants only for a single year; recurrence depends on continued legislative action. This model of funding is unstable because it relies on the resolve of the state legislature in any given year.

School climate, school safety, and social-emotional learning might be buzzwords now, but what happens in a few years when their popularity wanes? States must establish more secure funding streams for SEL if they want to continue to support their students' social-emotional development.

Tennessee

For the 2018–19 fiscal year, Tennessee created school safety funding, which included \$25 million in one-time funding for School Safety and Security Grants and \$10 million in recurring funding for Safe Schools Grants.¹⁷ Then, for the 2019–20 fiscal year, Tennessee added another \$20 million in one-time funding and another \$10 million in recurring funding.¹⁸ These additions bring Tennessee's total amount of recurring school safety funding to \$20 million. Although this funding is directed at providing resource officers in schools, the money can be used for security upgrades and violence prevention programs by schools that already have a resource officer.¹⁹ But relegating violence prevention to secondary or tertiary funding options doesn't create a strong funding stream for SEL.

Texas

In spring 2019, Texas passed SB 11, a school safety bill that requires schools to create school safety plans that include SEL and mandates the inclusion of SEL in health curricula. This bill creates the School Safety Allotment, which provides school districts with a yearly allotment for each student based on average daily attendance and overall fund appropriation. These funds have to be used on school safety and security, including:

- School infrastructure improvements
- Physical barrier use or installation
- Security equipment (including cameras)
- Communications systems for emergencies
- Security officers and local law enforcement collaboration
- Emergency response training
- Prevention and treatment programs for addressing adverse childhood experiences
- Mental health professionals and supports
- Behavioral health services
- Threat-reporting systems
- Suicide prevention and intervention and services if attempts are made²⁰

Like Ohio, New York, and Tennessee, Texas has prioritized an umbrella topic (school safety). Although it doesn't "demote" SEL like Tennessee does under its school safety legislation,

Texas does water down the likelihood of the grant being used for SEL, because SEL is just one bullet point in a long list of possible options to use funds for. Since this bill just passed during this legislative session, it's too soon to say where the funds ultimately will be spent. However, if Ohio and Tennessee are any example, Texas will need more specific SEL funding to ensure money goes toward SEL programming.

A Missed Opportunity: Tennessee

Tennessee's school safety grants are significant sums and set to recur. Schools received money that could support violence prevention programs, but opted to spend the grant funds on other deterrence-related resources. Tennessee's grants permit the following uses of the funds:

- Facility security and planning
- School safety personnel
- Violence prevention
- Training and drills
- Behavioral health²¹

According to the Tennessee School Safety Center, the following categories describe actual spending:

- Perimeter control
- Vehicle control
- Signage
- Access control
- Visitor management
- Surveillance
- Communications
- Law enforcement
- Classroom security
- Emergency planning
- Training
- School safety
- Mental health staffing²²

Although these categories all fall within the permissible use of funds, there's one allocation notably missing—violence prevention. This grant could have been used for a social-emotional learning program, but wasn't, which was a missed opportunity. The state could have required spending in each of the permissible grant categories so schools were not only preparing to handle safety risks, but also investing in preventing them in the first place.

Conclusion

States must establish or improve their SEL funding streams if they want to support their students' social-emotional needs. Otherwise, SEL will be at risk of being cut, programs will be left unsupported, and progress will stall. State surveys are clearly paying lip service to SEL.²³ However state budgets don't support SEL by calling it out specifically and allocating it funding. We probably can't expect dedicated state-level SEL funds any more than we can expect such dedicated funds for, say, language arts or mathematics. Rather, dollars will be spent locally on what the state, in conjunction with locals, deems a priority. Something can become a priority by one of many different paths. Priorities are written into a state's legal definition of a student's right to public education. But things can also rise to priority via state accountability and intervention strategies, as well as local school measurement and improvement plans. Each of these options has established funds that could be used to provide enduring and fortified support to SEL. If states continue down the grant path to fund SEL, they need to prioritize SEL, either by providing an SEL-specific grant or by putting SEL applicants ahead of other applicants.

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