



# Politics May Not Impede SEL Development

States are increasing efforts to implement social-emotional learning (SEL) in their schools. Who's leading the charge at the state level? Does SEL hold partisan sway? Which party, if either, supports it?

SEL is the process of developing self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills (Committee for Children, 2020). It has gained traction in the United States as an essential part of a student's education. Public education relies on teachers delivering academic instruction. It also relies on teachers to support students' non-academic needs to further their academic learning and their future success.

All 50 states have early childhood standards or benchmarks for SEL to better prepare students entering the K–12 learning environment (CASEL, 2020). In elementary and secondary schooling, 20 states have adopted SEL standards, benchmarks, or competencies that span from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

This brief analyzes the political affiliations of states that have adopted SEL K–12 standards, then suggests next steps for

policymakers as they approach SEL in other states. Our findings include:

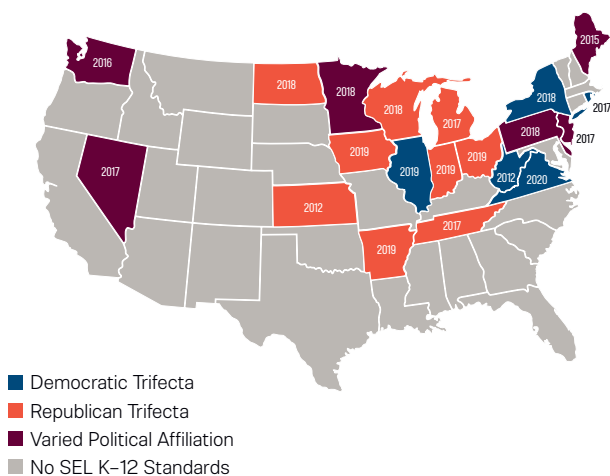
- Partisanship is not necessarily an impediment to passing state SEL standards
- States with Democratic trifectas and Republican trifectas—where both legislative chambers and the governor are of the same party—have adopted SEL K–12 standards at a relatively similar rate
- Geographic regions have patterns of adoption, primarily the Northeast and the Midwest
- State boards of education lead the charge with SEL K–12 standard adoption, reflected in both political affiliations
- State boards of education frequently frame SEL as a way to address school health and safety or as program or learning services

# Methodology

We analyzed the political affiliation of states that have adopted stand-alone SEL K–12 standards. Twenty states have adopted or required SEL K–12 stand-alone standards as of March 2020.<sup>1</sup> States were not included in this analysis if they placed SEL under a certain subject area, such as Health Education in [Colorado](#), or incorporated SEL components under a separate department. [Missouri](#), for example, houses its SEL work in its Counseling Department. We also assessed how state boards of education organize SEL and SEL online resources to better understand how SEL is situated within the framing of state education.

We analyzed state political makeup at the time of each state's standards adoption. We looked at party affiliation of the governor and state legislature. We designated state government trifectas as Republican or Democratic. A state was considered to have a varied political affiliation if it lacked a trifecta. We then analyzed state boards of education and superintendents for political affiliation. We analyzed state education websites based on the 2020 political makeup of the states' boards of education.

**Figure 1. SEL Crosses Party Lines: 20 States with SEL K–12 Standards and Their Political Affiliation at Time of State Standards<sup>2</sup>**



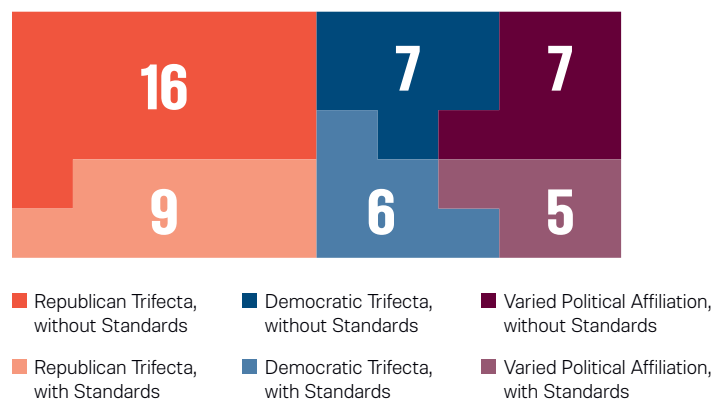
# SEL and Political Findings

The current divisive climate in politics might lead you to believe that SEL is yet another partisan issue at the state level. However, state government political affiliation didn't correlate with SEL K–12 standards adoption. Both sides of the aisle do wage criticism against SEL (Zhao, 2020), but those criticisms don't seem to deter state SEL K–12 standards.

A state's political makeup doesn't correlate with that state's commitment to SEL K–12 standards adoption (see Figure 1). Of the 20 states with SEL K–12 standards, nine were Republican trifectas at the time of their adoption of the standards. Five states with SEL K–12 standards were Democratic trifectas. Six states' political affiliations varied at the time of standards adoption. While more Republican trifectas have adopted SEL K–12 standards, their adoption rates are mostly proportional to that of Democratic trifectas (see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> Thirty-six percent of Republican trifectas have SEL K–12 standards and 42 percent of Democratic trifectas have SEL K–12 standards.<sup>4</sup>

While a state's political affiliation doesn't correlate with state SEL K–12 standards adoption, some regions in the United States have adopted standards in greater numbers than others. The Northeastern and central Midwestern states make up the majority of states that have adopted SEL K–12 standards.

**Figure 2. Both Parties Are Involved in SEL Work: A Similar Proportion of Republican and Democratic Trifectas with SEL K–12 Standards**



1. On March 20, 2020, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam signed HB 753, in regard to SEL K–12 standards.
2. Alaska and Hawaii are not included in this map. Neither state has SEL K–12 standards.
3. In order to compare the number of trifecta states with SEL K–12 standards to those without, the states lacking SEL K–12 standards were analyzed by the year that they adopted the early childhood education SEL standards or benchmarks. In total, 25 states were Republican trifectas, 12 were Democratic trifectas, and 13 were considered varied.
4. Both numbers were rounded to the nearest percentage.

# Timeline of Standards Adoption

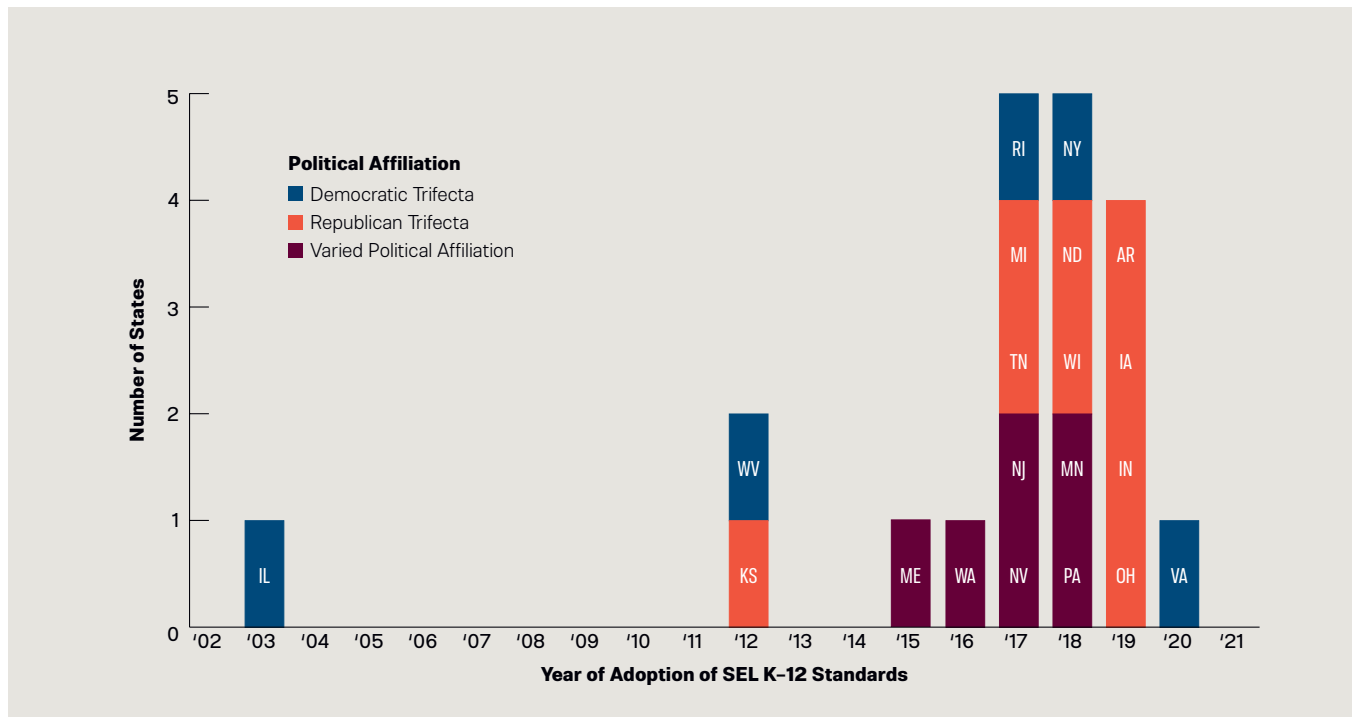
While there's a lack of correlation between state party affiliation and SEL standards adoption, the timeline in which the standards have been adopted demonstrates a recent increase in adoption of SEL K-12 standards (see Figure 3).

Illinois, a Democratic trifecta in 2003, was the earliest adopter of stand-alone social-emotional K-12 standards, requiring the development of standards with passage of the Children's Mental Health Act. It was not until 2012 that two other states, Republican trifecta Kansas and Democratic trifecta West Virginia, adopted state SEL K-12 standards or competencies for SEL. Maine, a state with varied party leadership, followed suit in 2015, and Washington,<sup>5</sup> another state with varied political affiliation, was next to develop standards in 2016.

Beginning in 2017, there was a significant spike in state SEL K-12 standards adoption. This might have been the result of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) beginning its Collaborating States Initiative (CSI) the

year prior. CSI supports states in developing and implementing SEL (CASEL, 2020). In 2017, five states (Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Tennessee) developed and adopted K-12 standards and competencies for SEL. These states also represented an assortment of political affiliations. Between 2018 and March 2020, 10 more states adopted SEL K-12 standards. Of these 10 states, six were Republican trifectas at the time. Two, Minnesota and Pennsylvania, were of varied political affiliation, and New York and Virginia were the two Democratic trifectas to add standards. While earlier adoption of standards didn't correlate with a particular political affiliation, more recently, the Republican trifectas have adopted standards at a faster rate. Nevertheless, most of the states with SEL K-12 standards adopted the standards as a result of work within their state boards of education. Therefore, the political affiliations of the boards of education must be considered as well.

**Figure 3. Recent Increase in SEL K-12 Standards Adoption**



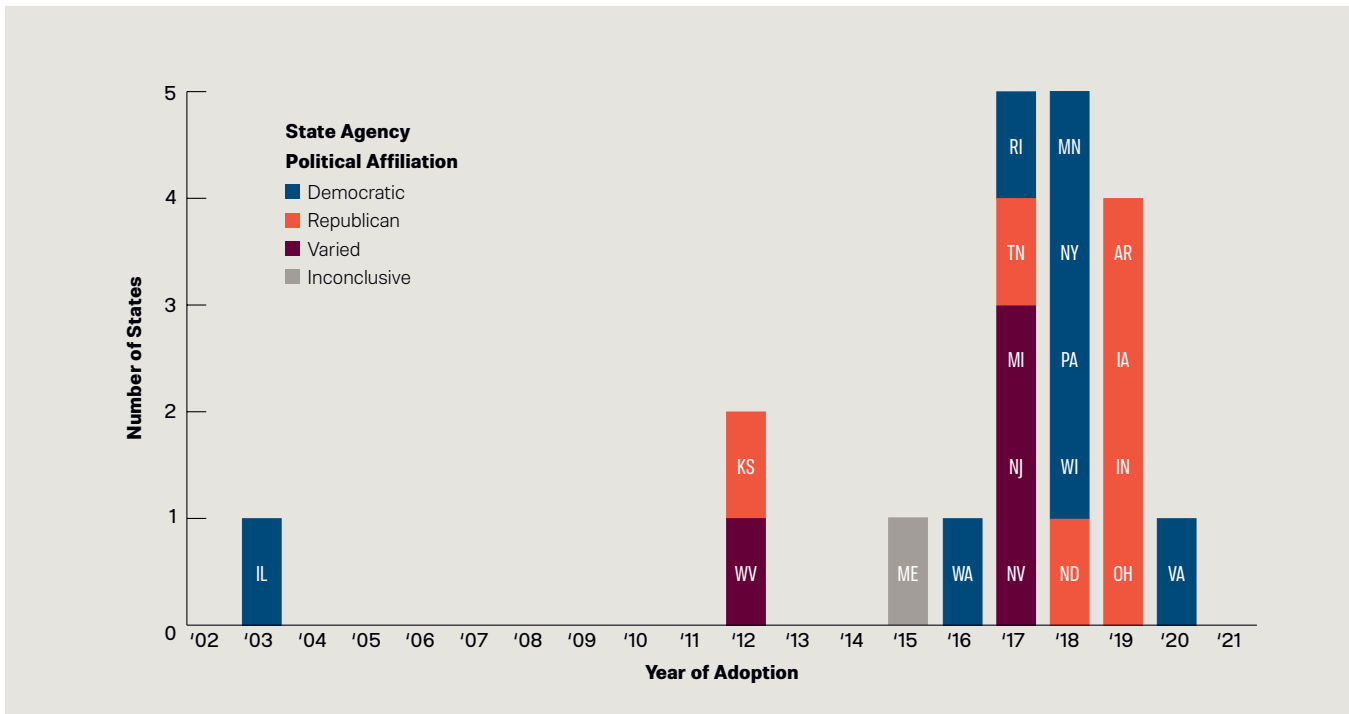
5. In 2016, while Democrats had a one-member majority in the Senate, one Democrat caucused with the Republicans, giving the Republican party the majority power. The Washington governorship and House of Representatives were both controlled by the Democratic party. Source: [ballotpedia.org/Washington\\_State\\_Senate#Party\\_control](http://ballotpedia.org/Washington_State_Senate#Party_control)

# State Boards of Education Follow a Similar Pattern

The political affiliation of a state board of education,<sup>6</sup> or superintendent for states without a board of education, also doesn't seem to determine if the state will adopt SEL K-12 standards. Following a similar pattern as the political affiliations of the executive and legislative branches of state governments, both Republican- and Democratic-majority boards of education are adopting SEL K-12 standards. Much of this can be connected to the fact that out of the 20 states with SEL K-12 standards, 11 of the boards of education are appointed by the governor. In fact, only one state, Kansas, has a board of education whose

members are all elected.<sup>7</sup> The way in which state boards of education are appointed or elected varies widely across the 20 states with SEL K-12 standards, but nevertheless continues the argument that state partisanship doesn't necessarily correlate with one specific party adopting SEL K-12 standards or not. Figure 4 illustrates the timeline of standards adoption based on the party affiliation of the boards of education (see Appendix A for how political affiliation was determined for state agencies).

**Figure 4. Political Affiliation of State Education Agencies Follows a Pattern Similar to State Governments in Considering the Adoption of SEL Standards<sup>8</sup>**

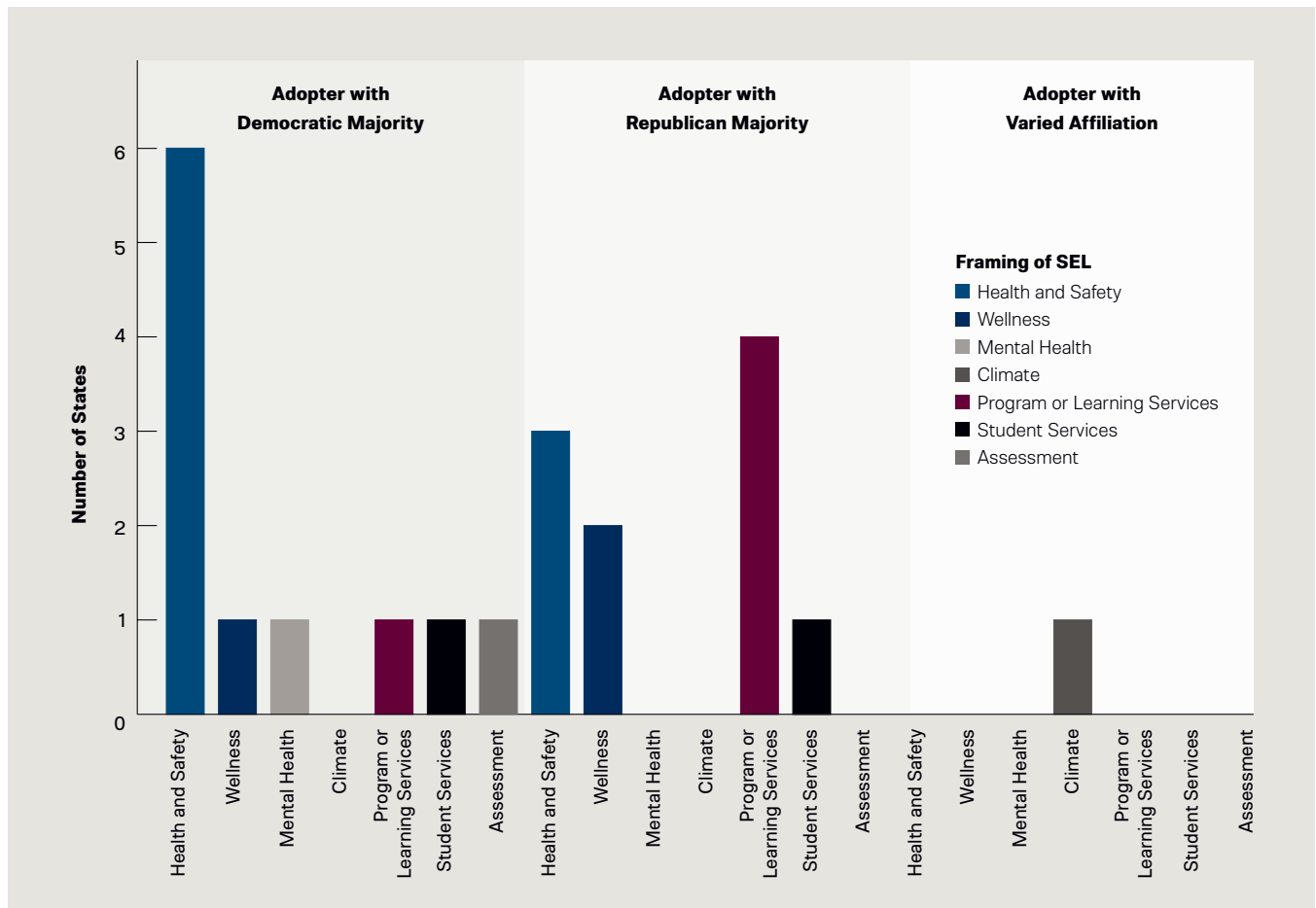


6. While many standards cite the Department of Education as the publisher of K-12 standards, those departments are under the direction of the state boards of education. States may title the boards differently, but the state-level governing body in charge of education is referred to as the board of education throughout this brief.  
 7. [ballotpedia.org/Kansas\\_State\\_Board\\_of\\_Education](http://ballotpedia.org/Kansas_State_Board_of_Education)  
 8. Maine was deemed inconclusive due to a lack of information available to verify all nine board members' appointment years.

# State Education Websites

Only a few states have authorizing legislation for adoption of SEL K-12 standards.<sup>9</sup> More often, state boards of education develop and suggest implementation of their standards without legislation. Therefore, we considered the majority political affiliation of the state board of education in hand with the way state education websites framed SEL. Figure 5 shows how all 22 states that include SEL toolkits and resources are framed on their state agency website. (Appendix B refers to the way in which state boards of education with state education websites that frame SEL had their political affiliation determined.)

**Figure 5. SEL Is Framed in a Variety of Ways Across Party Lines**

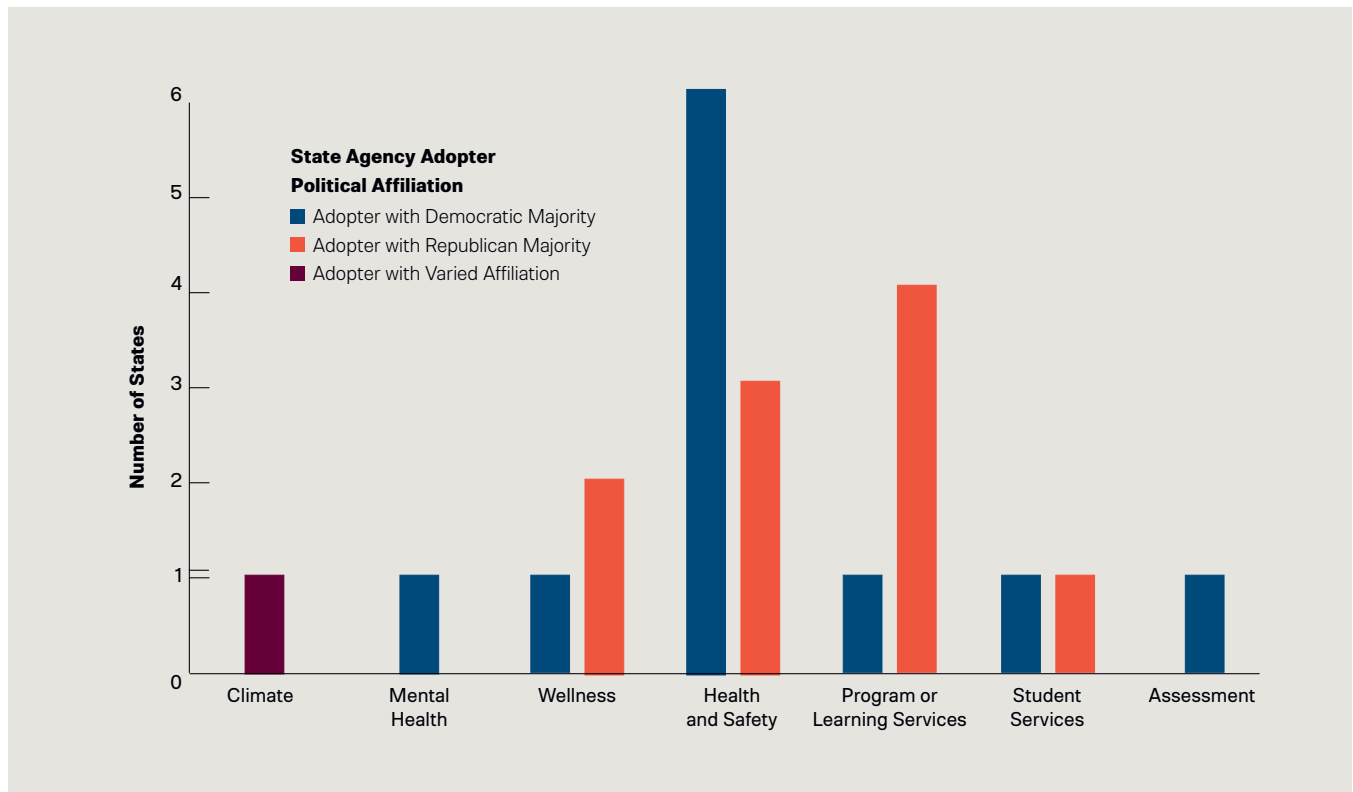


9. Illinois, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia.

While states characterize SEL in a variety of ways, framing it as an approach to address Health and Safety is the most typical categorization, favored by both Democrats and Republicans alike (see Figure 6). Program or Learning Services is the second most typical categorization. It addresses initiatives undertaken by states to implement more SEL. Student Services can also be linked with Program or Learning Services, as both address meeting the needs of students. The other categorizations for framing—Wellness, School Climate, and Mental Health—can

arguably fall under the Health and Safety framing, due to overlap in content, thus bolstering the number of states that fall under this framing category in practice. For example, the term “Health” is often used to describe student and staff well-being efforts. “Safety” as used in this context often means school safety in connection with building a positive school climate. Mass school shootings (Fiddiman et al., 2018) in the United States may help explain why SEL is considered through the Health and Safety framing in order to prevent violence upstream (Rogers, 2019).

**Figure 6. Health and Safety Favored by Both Political Parties to Frame SEL**



## Recommendations

Based on our findings, we recommend the following to continue to support students' social-emotional development at the state level:

- States looking to adopt SEL K-12 standards can look to other states as examples
- States can utilize regional trends and recent adoptions to further SEL throughout the nation:
  - Continue to build out support in the Northeast by using states with standards as examples for nearby states that have not yet adopted SEL K-12 standards
  - Midwestern states could partner to share professional learning initiatives
  - Southern states that have SEL K-12 standards could host states that don't to help those states better understand the value and positioning of SEL standards
- SEL advocates can frame multistate or national SEL conversations around school safety, student health, and a positive school environment, as these are more typical state frames and are shared across states with different party affiliations
- SEL advocates can engage boards of education in advocacy efforts, as the majority of SEL K-12 standards have been adopted as a result of boards of education; engaging governors can help, too, as they play a significant role in how board of education members are designated

## Conclusion

Partisan politics are not driving state SEL K-12 standards adoption; rather, SEL K-12 standards adoption crosses party lines and geographies. While state boards of education categorize this work differently depending on state political affiliation, the differences are modest. As states continue to develop their state-level SEL K-12 standards, they have examples to look to without tilting toward partisanship. To further the momentum across states and guard against politicizing SEL, the similarities in SEL efforts across party lines should be showcased. If successful, SEL could be viewed as another domain of learning alongside math, language, history, and science that young people can access in order to further their learning and well-being. Thus far, SEL shows potential as a relatively new, shared, national project in education.

### Appendix A: Adopter Affiliation at Time of SEL K-12 Standard Adoption

State (includes link to standards or policy document)	Who Was the Adopter?	Adopter's Party Affiliation at Time of Adoption	Year of Adoption
<a href="#">Illinois</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Democratic</b>	2003
<a href="#">Minnesota</a>	Superintendent <sup>10</sup> (governor appointed)	<b>Democratic</b>	2018
<a href="#">New York</a>	Board of education (state legislature appointed)	<b>Democratic</b>	2018
<a href="#">Pennsylvania</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Democratic<sup>11</sup></b>	2018
<a href="#">Rhode Island</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Democratic</b>	2017
<a href="#">Virginia</a>	Legislature <sup>12</sup>	<b>Democratic</b>	2020
<a href="#">Washington</a>	Board of education (elected by district directors and appointed by governor) <sup>13</sup>	<b>Democratic</b>	2016
<a href="#">Wisconsin</a>	Superintendent <sup>14</sup> (elected)	<b>Democratic</b>	2018
<a href="#">Arkansas</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Republican</b>	2019
<a href="#">Indiana</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Republican<sup>15</sup></b>	2019
<a href="#">Iowa</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Republican</b>	2019

State (includes link to standards or policy document)	Who Was the Adopter?	Adopter's Party Affiliation at Time of Adoption	Year of Adoption
<a href="#">Kansas</a>	Board of education (elected)	Republican <sup>16</sup>	2012
<a href="#">North Dakota</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	Republican <sup>17</sup>	2018
<a href="#">Ohio</a>	Board of education (elected and governor appointed)	Republican <sup>18</sup>	2019
<a href="#">Tennessee</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	Republican	2017
<a href="#">Michigan</a>	Board of education (elected)	Varied <sup>19</sup>	2017
<a href="#">Nevada</a>	Board of education (elected and governor appointed) <sup>20</sup>	Varied	2017
<a href="#">New Jersey</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	Varied <sup>21</sup>	2017
<a href="#">West Virginia</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	Varied <sup>22</sup>	2012
<a href="#">Maine</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	Inconclusive <sup>23</sup>	2015

## Appendix A Methodology:

If the governor was the party responsible for appointing the board of education, then the political party of the governor was the assigned political affiliation. If the board of education was elected, or partially elected, political affiliation was determined by the political party under which the board of education member

ran their campaign. However, many ran as nonpartisan. If this was the case, past political history was also considered, and the majority partisan affiliation was used to characterize the board of education.

10. No state board of education.

11. Thirteen Democrats, four Republicans.

12. Virginia's legislature voted to develop SEL K-12 standards in March 2020.

13. One member is also elected by state-approved private schools. Five members are elected by district directors while seven are appointed by the governor. The superintendent is elected. The superintendent at the time of adoption ran as nonpartisan, but had [previous legislative experience as a Democrat](#).

14. No state board of education.

15. Superintendent is elected. Indiana's superintendent is Republican.

16. Three Democrats, seven Republicans.

17. Superintendent is elected. North Dakota's superintendent ran as nonpartisan but is a Republican.

18. One elected board of education member ran as Republican and 10 ran as nonpartisan, though many had previous partisan political careers; overall the affiliation was dominated by Republicans.

19. Of eight total members of the board of education, four were Republicans and four were Democrats. Source: [michigan.gov/documents/mde/2017-18\\_MDE\\_Annual\\_Review\\_and\\_Appendix\\_631432\\_7.pdf](#)

20. Four members are elected; all ran as nonpartisan and don't have histories of political affiliation.

21. Four Democrats and four Republicans, with [only eight of 13 seats filled at the time](#). Standards were published August 2017.

22. Varied by [law](#).

23. History and representation of all state school board members was not available.



## Appendix B: Current State Education Agency Political Affiliation

State (includes link to SEL webpage)	Who's in Charge of State Education?	Board of Education Current Majority Party Affiliation	Framing of SEL
<a href="#">California</a>	Board of education (governor appointed) <sup>24</sup>	<b>Democratic</b>	Program or Learning Services
<a href="#">Illinois</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Democratic</b>	Wellness
<a href="#">Kentucky</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Democratic</b>	Health and Safety
<a href="#">Michigan</a>	Board of education (elected)	<b>Democratic<sup>25</sup></b>	Health and Safety
<a href="#">Minnesota</a>	Superintendent <sup>26</sup> (governor appointed)	<b>Democratic</b>	Health and Safety
<a href="#">New York</a>	Board of education (state legislature appointed)	<b>Democratic</b>	Student Services
<a href="#">Oregon</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Democratic</b>	Assessment
<a href="#">Pennsylvania</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Democratic</b>	Health and Safety
<a href="#">Rhode Island</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Democratic</b>	Health and Safety
<a href="#">Washington</a>	Board of education (elected by district directors and appointed by governor) <sup>27</sup>	<b>Democratic</b>	Health and Safety
<a href="#">Wisconsin</a>	Superintendent <sup>28</sup> (elected) <sup>29</sup>	<b>Democratic</b>	Mental Health
<a href="#">Arkansas</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Republican</b>	Program or Learning Services
<a href="#">Indiana</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Republican<sup>30</sup></b>	Wellness
<a href="#">Iowa</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Republican</b>	Program or Learning Services <sup>31</sup>
<a href="#">Kansas</a>	Board of education (elected)	<b>Republican<sup>32</sup></b>	Program or Learning Services
<a href="#">Massachusetts</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Republican</b>	Student Services
<a href="#">New Hampshire</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Republican<sup>33</sup></b>	Wellness
<a href="#">New Jersey</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Republican<sup>34</sup></b>	Health and Safety
<a href="#">North Dakota</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Republican<sup>35</sup></b>	Health and Safety
<a href="#">Ohio</a>	Board of education (elected and governor appointed)	<b>Republican<sup>36</sup></b>	Program or Learning Services
<a href="#">Tennessee</a>	Board of education (governor appointed)	<b>Republican</b>	Health and Safety
<a href="#">Colorado</a>	Board of education (elected)	<b>Varied<sup>37</sup></b>	Climate

24. Superintendent is elected. While he ran as nonpartisan for this position, he previously served in the legislature as a Democrat.

25. Six Democrats, two Republicans.

26. No state board of education.

27. One member is also elected by state-approved private schools. Five members are elected by district directors while seven are appointed by the governor. The superintendent is elected. The superintendent at the time of adoption ran as nonpartisan, but had [previous legislative experience as a Democrat](#).

28. No state board of education.

29. In 2019, the current superintendent was [appointed](#) by the Wisconsin governor, as the previous superintendent vacated the position to become governor.

30. Superintendent is elected. Indiana's superintendent is Republican.

31. Designated as such due to the School Climate Transformation Grant delegated under Learning Supports.

32. Eight Republicans, two Democrats.

33. Two members were appointed by a Democratic governor.

34. Eight Republican appointees, five Democrat appointees.

35. Superintendent is elected. North Dakota's superintendent ran as nonpartisan, but is a Republican.

36. One elected board of education member ran as Republican and 10 ran as nonpartisan, though many had previous partisan political careers; overall the affiliation was dominated by Republicans.

37. Four Democrats, three Republicans.

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