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Partnership as a “Lever for Transformation”: County-Level Leadership to Advance Systemic Social and Emotional Learning

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) promotes student academic achievement and well-being. Social workers are well positioned to leverage their cross-sector, multilevel skill set for providing SEL implementation leadership. Leadership plays a critical role in achieving high quality SEL implementation in classrooms, schools, and districts. However, there are no empirical studies of SEL leadership above the district level, limiting social workers’ ability to leverage all levels of the education system, including counties and states, to take SEL to scale. This study explores who provides county-level SEL implementation leadership, why county level leaders partner for SEL implementation, and how they cultivate partnerships in the context of a statewide effort to advance SEL. To conduct the study, county SEL implementation plans were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Plans indicated that county-level implementation leadership was provided by people across levels of the education system, sectors, and regions, and by people from nongovernmental entities. Plans indicated that partnerships were intended to integrate SEL with aligned efforts, seek multiple perspectives on implementation, and expand the capacity for SEL implementation. SEL leaders intended to cultivate partnerships through relationship building and collaboration structures. Similarities and differences noted in county-level SEL implementation leadership, in comparison with school and district levels, are discussed alongside practice implications.

Public schools in the United States are increasingly investing in social and emotional learning (SEL) to support young people and adults develop competencies, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Weissberg et al., 2015). Meta-analytic evidence suggests that SEL programs (i.e., curricula or other sequenced and explicit active learning strategies to facilitate SEL) have important effects on student outcomes, including greater academic achievement and well-being (Durlak et al., 2022). However, these benefits are achieved only when programs are implemented well (e.g., all program components are delivered as intended with specified dosage and quality; Durlak et al., 2011). Research has shown the important role that leadership plays in achieving the high-quality implementation of SEL interventions (Lee et al., 2018; Li et al., 2023). Implementation leaders are often school administrators and student/pupil services personnel who plan, support, and tailor SEL

implementation. However, the SEL literature is typically focused on the installation of a specific SEL program (e.g., TOOLBOX, Second Step, PATHS) within a classroom or school building (e.g., Espelage et al., 2013; Kusche & Greenberg, 2012; Shapiro et al., 2023). Systemic SEL aims to coordinate and align SEL implementation across all levels of the education system, such as classrooms, schools, and districts, but also regions, counties, and states. However, there is little research on SEL implementation leadership above the district level, which inhibits the application of evidence to expand practice at scale.

School social workers are multilevel practitioners who are well positioned to provide county- and state-level SEL implementation leadership. Social workers have the motivation and skills to collaborate across sectors and levels of practice (Kerson, 2004; Shapiro et al., 2018). In fact, one of the standards of the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW; 2025) *Practice Standards for School Social Workers* is interdisciplinary leadership and collaboration, stipulating that "school social workers shall also provide leadership and collaborate in the implementation of equitable school-based mental health programs that promote student and staff well-being and positive academic outcomes" (p. 8). By providing SEL implementation leadership, social workers also contribute to the profession's Grand Challenges goal of ensuring healthy development for all youth (Shapiro & Bender, 2018).

The current study aims to describe what SEL implementation leadership looks like above the district level, thus addressing a gap in the literature and illuminating possibilities for education sector social work practice. We explore county-level SEL implementation leadership in a statewide effort, asking who serves on county-level SEL implementation teams, why county-level SEL leaders collaborate with different partners, and how county-level SEL leaders cultivate partnerships. This study offers empirical evidence from practice to develop guidance for systemic SEL implementation by attending to implementation leadership above the district level.

SEL LEADERSHIP

School-level leadership affects the implementation quality of school-based interventions (Kam et al., 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Ransford et al., 2009). SEL implementation leadership is widely recognized to be distributive—"beyond any single individual" (Elias et al., 2006). SEL implementation leadership, therefore, includes both administrative staff who allocate resources and shape approaches to SEL by nature of their positions (e.g., principals, superintendents) and members of SEL teams (e.g., school social workers) and their partners (outside consultants) who take deliberate action to advance systemic SEL. The systemic SEL theory of action explicitly calls for establishing "a diverse and representative SEL team" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.-b, 1: SEL TEAM section) to effectively lead implementation, coordinate SEL, and

engage stakeholders across all levels of the education system. Broadly, SEL implementation leaders are thought to provide the support (e.g., funding, resources, training) necessary for building capacity (e.g., mindsets, knowledge, skills) to advance the structures and routines of SEL implementation (Shapiro et al., 2024).

Empirical investigations of SEL implementation leadership are sparse (Meyers et al., 2019). A widely used practice resource, the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, specifically recommends schoolwide implementation leadership teams with five to 10 members, including principals, teachers, data analysts, service providers, school support staff, community partners, students, and families (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.-a). The structure of the team is flexible; the school guide suggests adapting the team structure to fit the context of each school to efficiently leverage staff capacity and ensure representation of key communities within a given school. Meyers and colleagues (2019) observed practice applications of the school guide to school sites, noting that school-level SEL leadership teams varied in their composition (e.g., size, inclusion of school administrators and teachers), with whom they partnered (e.g., district-level specialists, families), and for what purposes (e.g., needs and resources assessment). Li et al. (2023) analyzed data from the same study and found that improvement in staff perceptions of school leader support for SEL was associated with improved student outcomes (i.e., attention, SECs, aggression).

After reviewing the literature, it appears that there is no peer-reviewed scholarship investigating SEL leadership at the district level. However, a report on districtwide SEL implementation by Kendziora and Yoder (2016) offers examples of districts establishing SEL teams that partner across education stages (i.e., high school, middle school, and elementary school) and with training experts (i.e., to provide SEL related professional development), concluding that district leaders are pivotal to organizing and integrating SEL with other district functions. Implementation leadership above the district level has not been studied. Multidistrict or regional efforts may have different considerations for who provides implementation leadership (e.g., leaders from across several districts), why they leverage partnerships (e.g., working with county-level health and social services to provide effective wraparound services), and how they tailor their approach to larger and more complex contexts (Stanley et al., 2024). Studying implementation leadership above the district level has implications for how to bring systemic SEL to scale.

COUNTY OFFICES OF EDUCATION AND CALHOPE STUDENT SUPPORT

An educational services agency (ESA) is an entity that provides implementation leadership across multiple districts. These ESAs have rarely been examined in research and vary in name (e.g., educational service districts, boards of cooperative educational

services) in different states (at the time of this writing, a state-by-state listing of ESAs was available at <https://members.aesa.us/directory>). In California, ESAs are called county offices of education (COEs). Fifty-eight COEs are led by elected or appointed county superintendents of education. As written in the California Education Code (the compilation of all state laws directly related to K–12 public schools), COEs have some responsibilities for providing academic and financial oversight and offering implementation support to local educational agencies (LEAs; e.g., districts, independent charter schools) in their regions for large-scale educational improvement initiatives (California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, n.d.). There are more than 1,000 LEAs in California that are authorized to provide public education to nearly 6 million students.

CalHOPE Student Support (henceforth: CalHOPE) is an effort to leverage the position of COEs to build capacity for systemic SEL implementation across California (for details, see Eldeeb et al., 2025; Shapiro et al., 2024). CalHOPE was funded in 2020 by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, coordinated through the California Department of Health Care Services, and led by the Sacramento COE and the Orange County Department of Education as part of an emergency response to the societal strains of the COVID-19 pandemic. The state planning team provides state-level support to COEs, who in turn help local educators advance social and emotional well-being, offer crisis support, and shore up a mental health support system for youth.

CalHOPE applies the Interactive Systems Framework (ISF; Wandersman et al., 2008) to the advancement of SEL in the education sector (Shapiro et al., 2024). The ISF is a knowledge dissemination and implementation framework that “proposes three interlocking systems to advance the dissemination and implementation of research knowledge: the distillation system, the support system, and the delivery system” (Metzger et al., 2025, p. 3). The Distillation System synthesizes existing research and translates it for practice. The Support System builds capacities for practitioners to do something differently. The Delivery System uses increased capacities to improve implementation. At the start of CalHOPE, the Greater Good Science Center distilled research for practice. COEs served as the support system, providing implementation support (i.e., training, tools, technical assistance, quality assurance/improvement services; Wandersman et al., 2012) to districts and schools in their regions. Schools and districts served as the delivery system that implemented SEL practices to yield positive student and adult outcomes. In addition to building capacity for specific interventions, the ISF envisions building general capacities (e.g., developing leadership skills) that support high-quality implementation tailored to the local context.

Additionally, CalHOPE is guided by the Systemic and Humanizing Implementation Focused on Transformation (SHIFT) model for SEL implementation, which articulates the conditions necessary for promoting systemic, equitable SEL implementation (Shapiro et al., 2025). The SHIFT model identifies mutually beneficial partnerships “across sectors and regions, between levels and divisions of the education system, with families and communities, allied to students, and connecting research and practice” (Shapiro et al., 2025, p. 44) as a lever for transformation—a mechanism that is envisioned to advance large-scale system change. Following this framework, partnerships help establish implementation supports that build capacities for SEL implementation in schools and districts (Metzger et al., 2026).

CURRENT STUDY

Evidence from the broader literature on educational leadership and a small body of SEL implementation leadership literature has yielded widespread agreement that leadership and collaboration are critical for high-quality SEL implementation at scale (Kennedy, 2019; Mahfouz et al., 2025; Mahoney et al., 2021). This study examines implementation plans submitted by COEs in spring 2021 (as part of their participation in CalHOPE) to answer the following three research questions (RQs): (1) Who provides county-level SEL implementation leadership? (2) Why do county-level leaders partner for SEL implementation? and (3) How are county-level partnerships cultivated for SEL implementation? This study seeks to explore county-level SEL implementation leadership to inform large-scale SEL implementation efforts.

METHOD

Context and Procedures

Data were generated by counties in California. California counties vary substantially. All 58 counties, except for San Francisco, serve rural student populations (places with fewer than 5,000 people, fewer than 2,000 housing units, or fewer than 425 housing units per square mile; Johnson & Mejia, 2024). By these criteria, 11 counties have a greater number of rural residents than urban residents. In the 2020–2021 academic year, the smallest county enrolled only 71 public school students, while the largest county enrolled nearly 1.4 million public school students (Population Reference Bureau, n.d.). For additional demographic information about these counties, please see Metzger et al. (2025).

Data were collected in the context of CalHOPE, a statewide effort to advance SEL in California. In November 2020, California county superintendents of schools were offered the opportunity to participate in CalHOPE. County participation was formalized through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between each COE and the lead (Sacramento

COE). The MOU was signed by 97 percent (56 of 58) of the counties. The MOU specified that county superintendents assign “county leads” from among their county office staff to lead SEL implementation in the county. County leads were asked to attend a monthly statewide SEL community of practice (CP) facilitated by the state planning team. The statewide CP provided training on various topics (e.g., creating a culture of belonging), shared evidence-based resources, created an opportunity for collaborative learning, and modeled SEL practices (Eldeeb et al., 2025). In turn, the MOU asked counties to host regional SEL CPs, which tailored statewide materials to their local contexts, and to provide implementation supports to districts, schools, and other youth-serving practitioners in their regions.

County leads began attending the statewide CP to build their capacity for providing SEL implementation support in January 2021. In February 2021, the number of county leads known to the state planning team ranged from one to six per county. These county leads varied widely in their job titles (e.g., coordinator of social emotional learning, special education director, psychologist, principal, director of differentiated assistance and grant programs). The CalHOPE MOU further specified that county leads would submit reports to the state planning team, including project descriptions and timelines. These practice-generated materials were de-identified (i.e., names of individuals and counties were replaced with numeric codes) for the secondary purpose of conducting research. This procedure was approved by the university’s institutional review board.

Data

This study analyzes the first comprehensive report (N = 56) submitted by county leads at the start of CalHOPE (March 2021): SEL implementation support plans (henceforth: plans). The two counties that did not submit plans included a county ranked in the top 5 percent of rural counties and in the top 5 percent of urban counties, respectively. Plans were designed for practice purposes and did not collect all of the information that would be desirable for research purposes (e.g., explicitly naming the submitting or contributing authors, their disciplinary backgrounds/roles, and their individual demographics). County plans described how COEs intended to host local CPs and provide SEL implementation support in their regions. County leads submitted responses (via email or Google Forms) to the following prompts:

1. Please describe the activities related to the planning, development, and implementation of your County Community of Practice (CP), including the composition of your County team. Please provide an updated roster of your County team if additions have been made.

2. Describe the steps you will take to recruit a wide and diverse set of administrators, teachers, classified staff, and nonprofits throughout the County to participate in the CP.

3. What technical assistance will you provide to administrators, teachers, classified staff, and nonprofits to implement SEL and Crisis Counseling Strategies within the Community of Practice structure? What will be the focus (topics or concepts) of the technical assistance?

4. Please provide your project timeline and description.

Plans varied in length (524 to 2,001 words) and in their inclusion of tables, pictures, and links.

Qualitative Content Analysis

The implementation plans were analyzed using content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Sandelowski, 2000) to provide descriptions of county-level SEL implementation leadership. An iterative consensusbased approach to coding and analysis leveraged all authors' viewpoints in reviewing and interpreting the plans to facilitate rich engagement with the data, ensure coding consistency, and mitigate bias through the discussion of multiple perspectives (Hemmler et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2005). Data were analyzed using Dedoose (Version 9.2.012) software.

We used the following analytic process. First, the first three authors familiarized themselves with the data and developed a preliminary set of a priori parent codes based on our research questions and the plan prompts that identified leaders (RQ1) and described partnering efforts (RQ2 and RQ3). With this initial codebook, the first three authors piloted the coding and consensus process by independently coding a subset of six plans. Through an iterative coding process and weekly discussions, we inductively developed and refined additional child codes, checked coding accuracy, and established a process for reconciling coding discrepancies. This resulted in the creation of the codebook used to code the remainder of the plans.

We coded the remaining plans using the revised codebook. The third author independently coded all the implementation plans. To ensure consistency and agreement among coders across the entire dataset, the first author independently double coded 25 percent of each plan, rotating through the four prompts in the plans. Double coding was discussed between the first and third authors during weekly meetings. To reach consensus, coders kept memos throughout the coding process, took note of discrepancies during discussions, and recorded how discrepancies were resolved (Hill et al., 2005). When needed, discrepancies were resolved by the second author.

The final codebook captured descriptions of leaders (RQ1), or the individuals or entities that were explicitly named as part of the COE SEL leadership team and identified as contributing to implementation support (e.g., providing training, consulting on implementation planning, supporting CP participant recruitment) across the prompts. Individuals or entities who were not clearly described as contributing to SEL implementation leadership (e.g., participants attending CPs) were not coded as leaders. The codebook also included descriptions of anticipated partners and their contributions (RQ2 and RQ3). These descriptions included the nature of responsibilities (e.g., a district leader charged with coordinating SEL and wellness-related initiatives), relationships (e.g., a long-standing coalition between multiple counties), and activities (e.g., a private consultant provided technical assistance to schools and districts). After completing coding, authors then reviewed the data for emergent patterns, developed candidate themes in response to the research questions, and collaboratively finalized themes.

RESULTS

Our analysis of the SEL Implementation Support Plans revealed who was anticipated to provide implementation leadership, why leaders planned to partner for implementation, and how they intended to cultivate partnerships in the context of county-level systemic SEL implementation. Specifically, we found that implementation leadership was envisioned to be provided by people situated at various levels of the educational system (e.g., COE SEL leaders, district staff, school staff), across sectors (e.g., other county agencies or organizations) and regions, and in nongovernmental entities (RQ1). We found that leaders planned to partner for SEL implementation for three common reasons: (1) to integrate SEL with aligned efforts, (2) to seek multiple perspectives on implementation, and (3) to expand capacity for SEL implementation (RQ2). Last, we found that partnerships among SEL leaders were cultivated by relationship building and structures that support collaboration (RQ3).

RQ1: Who Leads County-Level SEL Implementation?

The landscape of who contributes to county-level SEL implementation leadership varied. Within the education sector, plans featured implementation leadership provided by COE, district, and school staff. County plans featured partnering across sectors (i.e., agencies or organizations from within the county), across regions (i.e., multicounty coalitions), and with nongovernmental entities (i.e., private sector entities), as shown in Table 1. Among these sources of leadership, there was also variation in their backgrounds and job titles of the collaborators (e.g., school staff were teachers, social workers, librarians).

Table 1: Codebook Types, Definitions, and Examples for SEL Implementation Leaders

Leader Type	Definition	Examples
Education sector support system: COE staff	COE leaders provide supports to districts and schools, often liaising with the state department of education. Positions are often related to planning, coordination, development, and administration of larger education initiatives. Usually considered “central” to a county and not affiliated with specific sites.	County superintendents, COE-level directors (e.g., director of student, family, and community engagement)
Education sector delivery system: district and school staff	District and school staff deliver services to sites and may more directly support school staff, students, and families.	District-level directors (e.g., of student support services), school staff (e.g., principals, teachers)
Cross-sector: agencies or organizations within the county	Leaders from county agencies and local organizations or nonprofits—outside of the education sector and purview of COEs—who collaborate for SEL planning and actions.	Public health or behavioral health agencies, youth-serving organizations (e.g., Boys & Girls Club)
Cross-region: multicounty coalitions	Leaders from multiple counties working together to support implementation in the focal county.	Collaboratives consisting of multiple neighboring counties, consultative relationships with a partnering county
Nongovernmental: private sector entities	Leaders who provide consulting, training, speaking, curricular, or other supports that are external to the county.	Individual consultants, consulting businesses, contracted services (e.g., from a vendor for SEL curriculum), state or national organizations (e.g., the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning)

Notes = SEL = social and emotional learning; COE = county office of education

COE Staff. COE staff provided leadership in 100 percent of the SEL implementation plans (N = 56). This was expected given that COE representatives were appointed to provide implementation leadership. COE leaders had varied roles and functions. For example, many counties (63 percent) included COE SEL leaders from administrative units related to educational services (e.g., special education local plan areas, English language arts/English language development) and instructional development (e.g., instruction and curriculum, leadership development, teacher induction). In a majority of counties (55 percent), SEL leaders came from units related to student and community well-being (e.g., Multi-Tiered Systems of Support [MTSS], mental health services, social and emotional wellness, school climate). Some counties (33 percent) included COE SEL leaders from

administrative units that oversee grants and initiatives (e.g., differentiated assistance, continuous improvement).

District and School Educational Staff. COE leaders did not plan to lead county implementation alone. County plans reflected partnerships with educational staff from districts and schools (30 percent). District and school staff were most frequently student support service providers (e.g., school counselors, mental health clinicians, school psychologists), administrators (e.g., principals), and instructional staff (e.g., teachers, librarians, paraeducators). County leadership in smaller counties (i.e., with fewer districts) tended to include a greater proportion of leaders from schools and districts.

County Agencies and Local Organizations. Some plans also included leaders from other county agencies outside of the education sector (34 percent), most commonly from agencies within health and human services (e.g., county behavioral health, public health, social services, crisis services, child and Table 1: Codebook Types, Definitions, and Examples for SEL Implementation Leaders Leader Type Definition Examples Education sector support system: COE staff COE leaders provide supports to districts and schools, often liaising with the state department of education. Positions are often related to planning, coordination, development, and administration of larger education initiatives. Usually considered “central” to a county and not affiliated with specific sites. County superintendents, COE-level directors (e.g., director of student, family, and community engagement) Education sector delivery system: district and school staff District and school staff deliver services to sites and may more directly support school staff, students, and families. District-level directors (e.g., of student support services), school staff (e.g., principals, teachers) Cross-sector: agencies or organizations within the county Leaders from county agencies and local organizations or nonprofits—outside of the education sector and purview of COEs—who collaborate for SEL planning and actions. Public health or behavioral health agencies, youth-serving organizations (e.g., Boys & Girls Club) Cross-region: multicounty coalitions Leaders from multiple counties working together to support implementation in the focal county. Collaboratives consisting of multiple neighboring counties, consultative relationships with a partnering county Nongovernmental: private sector entities Leaders who provide consulting, training, speaking, curricular, or other supports that are external to the county. Individual consultants, consulting businesses, contracted services (e.g., from a vendor for SEL curriculum), state or national organizations (e.g., the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) Notes: SEL ¼ social and emotional learning; COE ¼ county office of education. 146 Children & Schools VOLUME 48, NUMBER 3 JULY 2026 Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cs/article/48/3/141/8706683 by UC Berkeley user on 16 September 2026 family services). Some COEs specifically named leaders from other youth-serving

nonprofits (e.g., AmeriCorps, Boys & Girls Club, First 5, YMCA). In several counties, leadership plans reflected the diverse resources and composition of the local communities. For example, counties with histories of tribal partnership included leaders from tribal entities, and one county included a local university medical system, which demonstrated counties' efforts to tailor SEL implementation support to unique local contexts.

Multicounty Coalitions. Some plans distributed SEL implementation leadership across multiple counties. For example, 10 COEs (18 percent) shared five (not mutually exclusive) instances of working together in groups, which ranged in size from two to three counties. These COEs offered each other consultative support to coordinate services in their region. These coalitions appeared in one of two distinct ways: (1) county leads invited leaders from other COEs to share their expertise and experience; or (2) multiple smaller, geographically proximal COEs, with a history of working together, colead a multicounty effort.

Nongovernmental: Private Sector Entities. Some plans referenced private sector entities that did not otherwise have an affiliation with the COE (21 percent), and also provided SEL implementation leadership. Private sector entities included in plans were individuals and organizations with whom COEs contracted for services, often named as “consultants.” County leads enlisted a variety of external human resources, including SEL curriculum vendors, implementation and leadership development consultants, and expert speakers. For example, one county partnered with a vendor to obtain curriculum-specific professional development to meet the “extreme need for SEL curriculum” in their region.

RQ2: Why Do Leaders Partner for SEL Implementation?

We found three primary explanations for why SEL plans included partners for SEL implementation: to coordinate SEL with aligned efforts, to seek multiple perspectives on implementation, and to expand capacity for SEL implementation.

Coordinate SEL with Aligned Efforts. County plans described aligned efforts in their county, such as MTSS and Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS). Coordinating these efforts with SEL was seen as an important part of implementation. One plan intentionally “mapped out prior and ongoing efforts” in order to identify opportunities for integrating SEL with existing frameworks and workstreams, while another planned for “the integration of SEL into existing wellness/mental health initiatives.” Another plan noted that implementing SEL “aligns with the goals of other projects happening simultaneously, with similar yet different goals. These include the MHSSA [Mental Health Student Services Act] grant (involving 12 districts) . . . and the already existing School Counselor Community of

Practice.” Plans also identified alignment with Tobacco-Use Prevention Education efforts and interagency collaboratives designed to coordinate county mental health and social services for youth. One plan noted that SEL efforts were a “complementary outgrowth” of existing work, and that they planned to “[combine] resources and efforts.” One plan explained that partnering for SEL implementation helped “to ensure collaboration and initiatives were aligned, supported, and not overlapped.”

Seek Multiple Perspectives. In addition to aligning SEL with existing efforts, plans suggested an intention to seek new and different perspectives through a “broader lens.” In contrast to the earlier theme, plans to partner were explained as providing new perspectives (e.g., from special education, county mental health services, other COEs), rather than coordinating existing efforts. For example, one plan described meeting with SEL leaders from a neighboring county with more developed SEL implementation “to gain additional insights for [their own] SEL efforts.” Another plan described a COE SEL leader learning from an interagency “meeting for counselors/behaviorists [across the county],” which helped them “to gauge the current supports, trends, [and] concerns in mental health in [the county].” Some plans conveyed an intention to partner with leaders serving populations who may especially benefit from SEL (e.g., special education students, foster youth), in order “to recruit a diverse group to participate in” their SEL CP. One county described their anticipated efforts to “leverage current networks,” consisting of a coalition of leaders across sectors who are jointly committed to youth well-being.

Providing Support to Build Capacity. County plans also anticipated partnering to build regional capacity in the implementation support and delivery systems. County plans revealed a desire to build the internal capacity of the COE (e.g., by developing COE leadership skills). For example, a county plan anticipated partnering to “provide individual coaching and technical support to the coordinator and [county team] to . . . build capacity on MTSS/ SEL efforts” and improve the sustainability of their SEL implementation efforts. One plan explained, “We have been working with [another COE] and their team to become trainers and increase our capacity to support . . . PBIS development and implementation.” In some cases, plans referenced working with a consultant to “implement/develop [the county] SEL community of practice.” Finally, plans shared an intention to build collective capacity by working together “to provide a myriad of services and assistance to all tri-county LEAs and Community-Based Organizations.”

Planning to partner was also motivated by an intention to provide schools and districts with support to deliver SEL. One county’s goal was “to bring SEL experts and resources (materials and supplies) . . . to school districts/sites.” Another plan specified that partnering would help them provide curriculum and professional development: “The

[county SEL team] will be providing web-based SEL curriculum through a partnership with [an external SEL organization].” Another county partnered to provide tailored technical support: “[The consultant] will provide up to three hours of individual coaching/ technical support to interested participants that meets the needs of their school site/district.” One county intended to provide incentives by offering Continuing Education Units with their local university to participating educators.

RQ3: How Are Partnerships Cultivated?

In addition to describing who led county-level SEL implementation and the reasons why counties formed partnerships, the plans featured two approaches for cultivating these partnerships. First, the plans described relationship building, which entailed forming new relationships and maintaining existing ones. Second, plans described developing structures that support collaboration, such as collaborative task forces and meetings, as a mechanism for actualizing partnering efforts.

Relationship Building. Plans described relationship building as a way to cultivate partnerships for SEL implementation. Relationship building entailed forming new relationships and leveraging preexisting relationships as a foundation for partnering for SEL implementation. One county described its intention for “districts to . . . build relationships with each other and with the [county behavioral health representatives].” The importance of building relationships was emphasized as a particular strength of “tight-knit” rural communities. As one plan stated, “Once we build relationships, we don’t easily let them go. We have many successful efforts . . . to demonstrate [our] commitment to building sustaining community-based learning networks.” In many cases, counties described that preexisting, trusting relationships paved the way for partnering on SEL implementation. These preexisting relationships were opportunities to “[build] off of trusted and effective systems.” One county described their history of being actively “involved with our local tribal entities . . . [working] closely with them on several projects” would enable them to now collaborate on SEL implementation. Similarly, a county in a different region described that partnering for SEL was cultivated by a “history” of successful collaboration among small, neighboring counties.

Structures That Support Collaboration. In addition to building relationships, county plans depicted an intention to cultivate partnerships by developing structures that support collaboration. The plans described forming structures to coordinate the work and bring leaders together to plan, perform, and be collectively responsible for SEL implementation. This was often envisioned as task forces, councils, collaboratives, coalitions, or teams. One county recognized the need for an organizing body and then “established an SEL steering committee to help guide” SEL implementation. Others

planned to leverage existing organizing bodies as models or resources. For example, one county noted that their COE has “enjoyed an active, multi-disciplinary MTSS task force for 10 years,” which served as the model for an envisioned “SEL task force” that would coordinate the implementation of SEL CPs. Another described their plan to “leverage [their] existing Professional Learning Network (PLN) . . . to be our SEL Community of Practice launch team.” Similarly, another county leveraged an existing interagency council that brought together leaders from education, healthcare, and other organizations across the county that are dedicated to serving youth. The associated “governing body . . . designed to coordinate and organize all services throughout the county” was also envisioned to become responsible for coordinating SEL implementation. In addition to identifying structures to oversee SEL implementation, counties also identified ways to adjust meeting structures in support of SEL implementation. One county planned to “extend [learning network] meeting times and dedicate the latter portion of [their] sessions to discussing SEL priorities, practices, and resources.”

DISCUSSION

The current study qualitatively analyzed SEL implementation plans to describe county-level implementation leadership advancing systemic SEL in California. Our findings reveal that county-level SEL implementation leadership was provided by appointed county leads from varied administrative divisions, who partnered broadly with interest holders across education system levels, sectors, regions, and nongovernmental organizations to advance SEL implementation. County-level leaders partnered for SEL implementation in order to coordinate SEL, expand their perspectives on implementation, and improve capacity for SEL implementation. These partnerships were cultivated through relationship building and collaboration structures. These findings describe the ways that partnering among leaders takes shape in practice.

Taken together, our results at the county level reflect existing research and practice guidance on SEL at the school and district level, suggesting that SEL implementation leaders can leverage partnerships to guide the process of building coherence and a shared commitment among SEL implementation and related efforts. The Center for Whole-Child Education (2024) uplifts coherence as the critical process of determining how initiatives related to promoting youth well-being can be “mutually reinforcing, instead of disjointed and in competition with each other” (p. 6). They suggest that education leaders (a) review new and existing initiatives with interest holders to identify ways for efforts to be complementary, (b) establish a unified vision for the work, and (c) build the necessary relationships to engage adults in the shared work.

Our findings also suggest that county-level implementation leadership may have meaningful distinctions from district- and school-level implementation leadership. In contrast with Meyers and colleagues' (2019), who found that school-level SEL leadership teams faced difficulties identifying practices that were related to or could be coordinated with SEL, we found that county-level leadership was broadly distributed across workstreams and envisioned many possibilities for alignment and collaboration (e.g., MTSS, PBIS). Our findings align with theory and research suggesting that leadership is more effective when distributed widely (e.g., across district, county, and school levels), responsive to unique local context (e.g., partnering to coordinate SEL with existing MTSS efforts), and establishes opportunities for collaboration (e.g., through work groups; Leithwood et al., 2019). County-level implementation leaders may be especially well positioned to hold an expansive perspective on possibilities for collaboration because of their role as the implementation support system for a variety of initiatives across schools and districts in their region, giving them the scope to lean into systemic thinking.

Additionally, we found that county-level implementation leadership leveraged leaders from both the implementation support and delivery systems. Implementation support is provided in the context of interpersonal relationships (Wandersman et al., 2012). Previous research has found that the relationship quality between implementation support providers and implementers impacts the effectiveness of the support received (Chilenski et al., 2016; Gayles et al., 2024). Although it is generally accepted that relationship quality matters, little work has been done to explore the interpersonal relationships within and between the system levels (Wandersman et al., 2024). Herein, plans describe relationship building as a method of cultivating partnership for SEL implementation. By building trusting relationships, county-level leadership enacts the SEL that they intend to support. Combined leadership teams may offer one avenue for strengthening the relationship between the delivery and support systems and fostering continuous improvement efforts.

Further, this article makes an important contribution to understanding the critical space between state-level and district-level efforts to advance SEL practice statewide. Statewide SEL happens in the context set forth by state education entities (e.g., state departments of education, state boards of education, legislative committees, governor appointed commissions) that create a vision for SEL in their states; determine workforce preparation, certification, and licensure standards; provide regulatory and nonregulatory guidance; allocate funding; and create accountability systems (Yoder et al., 2025). The recently (and only) articulated theory of action for state-level SEL asserts, "We believe that systemic SEL can happen at the state, district, community, and school levels—creating the conditions that optimize the social, emotional, and academic development of all youth" (Yoder et al., 2021, p. 3). In this conceptualization, the leadership for statewide SEL is held

by state education agency (SEA) staff, who vary “in their role within the SEA, including consultants, managers, and assistant commissioners” (Yoder & Dang, 2023, p. 3) and face several barriers to achieving impact, including that educators “were not clear about where to start in their SEL implementation and needed support on how to start the work” and “communications from the SEA were not effective because educators and [site] leaders were unaware that state tools and support existed” (p. 6). The present article considers how leaders at the county level can serve as regional intermediaries between state and district entities, working to overcome barriers by partnering across levels and silos to support SEL implementation across the state. It is the first such article to systematically explore who serves on county-level leadership teams and how they work to advance SEL at scale.

Limitations and Future Directions

This qualitative study of county-level SEL implementation plans has several limitations. First, this study was limited to county-level ESAs within a single state, all of whom participated in CalHOPE. Results may not generalize to other states and their respective education system structures, or to the work of ESAs outside of CalHOPE opportunities and strategies. Future research should compare the work of ESAs across states and situations. Second, our iterative approach to consensus coding did not enable the quantitative assessment of intercoder reliability as a means of measuring the trustworthiness of our findings. Additionally, this study analyzed plans, which described anticipated and recently initiated activities, but did not assess what actually happened or the associated outcomes. Further, a deeper exploration of county-level SEL implementation leadership, triangulating multiple sources of data within a single region, may help elucidate additional information. These limitations can be further addressed through longitudinal analyses that look beyond a single point in time to determine how leadership evolves over the course of an extended effort and its associated outcomes.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of this study have implications for social work policy and practice. Our findings elevate a specific avenue for investment to advance SEL statewide: implementation leadership in COEs and similar education service agencies. Implementation leadership is well understood to moderate SEL implementation outputs and intervention outcomes (Shapiro et al., 2020). Yet, implementation leadership is neither routinely facilitated at the state level nor provided by leaders at the county level, underappreciating a regional entity’s unique position to partner across sectors, silos, and system levels, and with nongovernmental organizations at an economy of scale. Partnership is necessary to align initiatives, expand perspectives, and improve overall

capacity for SEL implementation. Given that investments in youth's social and emotional competence are cost beneficial in ways that extend far outside the education sector (Belfield et al., 2015), many sectors (e.g., departments of corrections, health and human services, public health, social services, employment development) may benefit from financially investing in county-level SEL leadership.

Our results illuminate a potential for social workers, alongside a wide variety of interest holders, to provide SEL implementation leadership. School social workers have relevant skills for navigating the education system, supporting student and staff well-being, providing professional development, and promoting positive school climate at school sites (Lige, 2021). Since social workers are also expert boundary spanners who are equipped to work in a wide variety of settings (e.g., schools, hospitals, government), and regularly facilitate cross-sector collaboration (D'Agostino, 2013; Kerson, 2004), they are well positioned for expanded SEL implementation leadership at the county and regional levels. As SEL leaders, social workers can help facilitate critical partnerships in school, district, or county contexts (Corbin, 2005) by leveraging interpersonal engagement (i.e., micro) practices as well as system change (i.e., macro) strategies to cultivate partnerships for SEL implementation. These findings also amplify a social work style of leadership, guided by the ethical principle that "social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships" and premise that "social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change" (Workers, 2021, Ethical Principles, paras. 12, 13). Social workers can advance the profession's Grand Challenge to ensure healthy development for youth by stepping into SEL implementation leadership roles and helping to bring SEL and aligned efforts to scale.

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