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Publication Date

2026-02-27

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Preparing SEL Systems to Sustain (and Support!) Educators

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For many years, the status quo of social and emotional learning (SEL) has been to ask individual teachers to implement isolated programs and teach didactic lessons in their classrooms. The results we've seen from this approach to SEL have been quite impressive, showing many positive outcomes for students, such as improved academic performance, lower emotional distress, and more (Durlak et al., 2022). Recently, there have been calls for *systemic* SEL – efforts that expand implementation to encompass all levels of the education system – rather than asking more from teachers. Teachers are already tasked with the herculean work of teaching the next generation while simultaneously navigating inequities in the U.S. public school system. The COVID-19 pandemic made teaching more challenging, and also exposed and exacerbated many of these inequities; COVID-19 made obvious how unsustainable it is for classroom teachers to carry the weight of supporting student well-being alone, and raised important questions regarding supporting teachers' own well-being. In response to these challenges, a community of educators and scholars in California came together with a bold goal: to disrupt the status quo by re-imagining SEL as a shared responsibility, rooted in equity and support. In this chapter, we explore learnings from this state-wide endeavor and offer considerations for how teachers everywhere can participate in local SEL leadership teams and be supported in co-constructing solutions for lasting, systemic, and equity-oriented change. Consistent with the goals of this book, this chapter aims to explore how a shared, systems-level, and authentically supported implementation of SEL may be healing for teachers by reversing

potential years of experiencing a “do as we say, not as we do” series of new initiatives from our profession.

CalHOPE Student Support

While we understand that high-quality social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have been proven to prevent challenges and promote well-being among young people, we also know – from both research and practice – that there exist implementation and equity-related challenges. To overcome these obstacles, systemic and transformative implementation is needed. We draw upon Mahoney and colleagues' (2021) conceptualization of *Systemic SEL,* which aims to engage each component of our complex educational system to support, integrate, and sustain SEL through building foundational supports, strengthening adult SEL, promoting SEL for students, and practicing continuous improvement. Additionally, *Transformative SEL* (tSEL) seeks to interrupt inequitable educational environments, address issues of power and privilege, and embed focal constructs as equity elaborations (e.g., belonging, identity) within SEL competencies (Jagers et al., 2019).

CalHOPE Student Support (henceforth: CalHOPE) was developed to support the systemic and transformative implementation of SEL in PK-12 public schools across all 58 of California’s counties. CalHOPE arose from a unique cross-sector partnership between the healthcare and education systems. Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) received funding in 2021 from the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), and worked in concert with California County Offices of Education (COEs), UC Berkeley, and The Center for Implementation to form a statewide network of experts to collectively augment SEL implementation across the state. Although “Student Support” is both in the name and the central aim of CalHOPE, CalHOPE has intentionally centered an “adults go first” model, focused on

supporting educators in the system (for a brief overview of CalHOPE Communities of Practice, see Eldeeb et al., 2025). As members of the CalHOPE Statewide Planning team, we have had a front row seat– and participated in– the shifts happening across the state of California. In this chapter, we elaborate on how CalHOPE has advanced SEL statewide, as well as the learnings generated from the work.

SHIFT-ING SEL

CalHOPE has expanded upon popularized approaches to SEL implementation with a logic model and vision called "SHIFT SEL" (see Figure 1; see Shapiro et al., 2025) that centers equity-oriented systems transformation. In applying the SHIFT SEL model, CalHOPE has endeavored to foster individual and systemic thriving where all people are engaged, highly performing, and well (individual thriving) *due to* favorable conditions for learning, teaching, and leading that catalyze, reinforce, and accelerate improvement (systemic thriving). This sequence is key for adult healing. Providing favorable conditions that ease the path for educators to take up caring and equitable practices (for themselves and others) actively disrupts the common practice of blaming teachers for poor implementation without providing requisite conditions for success.

The logic model is based on multiple years of practitioner insights and a systematic review of peer-reviewed research (see Shapiro et al., 2025) that integrates previously siloed branches of scholarship: (1) research on SEL implementation, (2) research on systemic SEL, and (3) research on equity and SEL. It includes three conditions for thriving: a foundation rooted in SEL competencies (e.g., social awareness) and embedded tSEL focal constructs (e.g., agency); positive climate (i.e., experiences of safety & connection, opportunities for voice & leadership, and culturally & linguistically responsive practices); and the right levers to transform the systems (i.e., partnerships, supports, capacities, structures & routines of SEL implementation).

If we are intentional about nurturing favorable conditions, then we can actualize our vision to shift SEL "to be a process through which people coordinate and collaborate to improve their: (a) conditions for learning, teaching, and leading; (b) care and connection offered and experienced; and (c) respective social and emotional repertoires – to empower their collective well-being, engagement, and performance to thrive" (Shapiro et al., 2025).

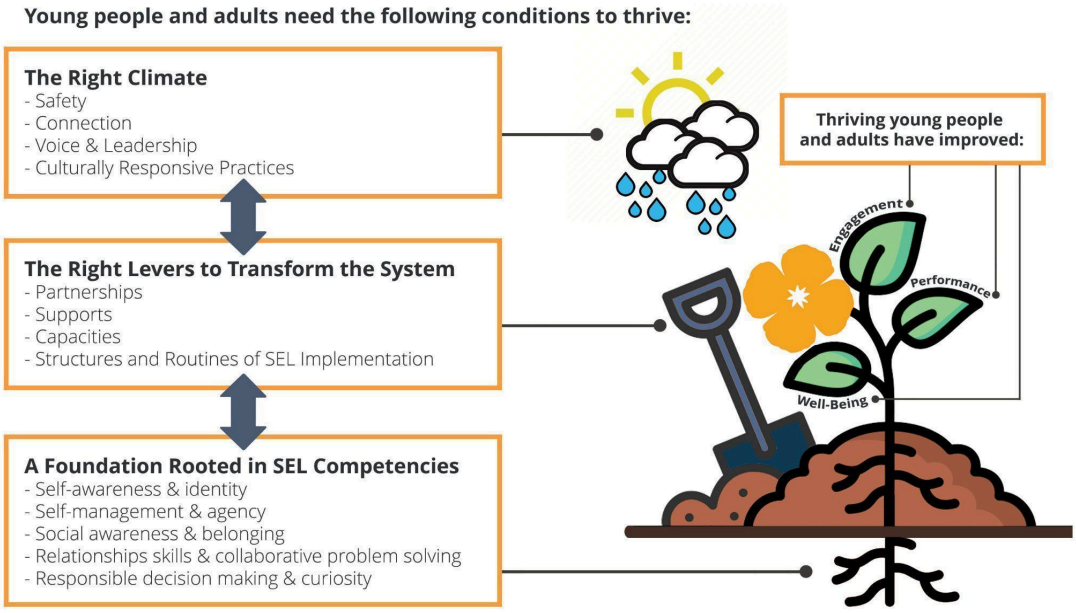


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So, what does all of this mean for teachers in classrooms? In the next section, we will describe three *Levers of System Transformation* (*Partnerships, Supports, and Capacities*) to explore how bolstering these levers is envisioned to contribute to the *Structures and Routines* needed for SEL implementation, cultivating more equitable learning environments, and promoting thriving in schools.

Partnerships

First, let's talk *partnerships*. CalHOPE begins with a deeply relational, co-learning approach that relies on "developing trusting, equity-pursuing, and mutually-beneficial

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partnerships across sectors and regions, between levels and divisions of the education system, with families, and allied to students" (Shapiro et al., 2024, p. 5). In the [ONLINE RESOURCE] we provide examples of these partnerships, how they've contributed to CalHOPE, and recent lessons we've learned about partnerships from our research. Here, we offer a few examples to think about *who* teachers can lean on to support SEL implementation and about *how* partners can help share the work.

Research-Practice Partnerships

Recognizing early on that research and practice are too often disconnected, CalHOPE partnered with UC Berkeley to help bridge that gap. Among other things, UC Berkeley hosts Greater Good in Education, a website that makes research evidence useful for educators. Greater Good synthesizes research literature into practical strategies for teachers to use to promote their own well-being (https://ggie.berkeley.edu/my-well-being). We've had the opportunity to learn directly from Greater Good about the work they do. We found that the work of building bridges between research and practice is highly dependent on the bridge builders having advanced research training and experience as educators (see Metzger et al., 2024 for full study results). In other words, not just anyone can turn scientific discoveries into actionable strategies for teachers, which is why partnering with people who have these complementary skills can help ensure educators get effective tools, without having to become researchers themselves.

Partnerships Between Regions

CalHOPE also worked to establish partnerships between every county/region across the state of California. This collective decided to learn with and from each other in a statewide Community of Practice (CP). CPs are a powerful mechanism for cultivating partnerships and enabling shared learning because, as one leader said, the CP format addresses " the limited

availability of high-level expertise" because "none of us were real experts…we needed to learn together" (Eldeeb et al., 2025, p. X). The CalHOPE statewide CP has become a monthly gathering where educational leaders from across the state share learning from spotlights and successes, connect, and build solutions.

Supports

High-quality partnerships lead to the second lever of transformation: *supports*. That is, the above partnerships, among others, generate, provide, and enable educators to take up supports. We conceptualize supports to include the training, coaching, tools, feedback loops, and funding that help educators implement SEL in a systemic and transformative way. Let's talk about two of them: tools and feedback loops (for more, see ONLINE RESOURCE).

Tools

As part of CalHOPE's efforts to support adults in implementing systemic and transformative SEL, we sought to provide a robust set of practical tools. In addition to sharing turn-key resources at each monthly statewide Community of Practice, CalHOPE funded the development and launch of UC Berkeley's SEL Foundations course, a 3-unit graduate-level course for in-service teachers. Throughout each of the 12 modules and four live online sessions, course participants had the chance to explore, engage, apply, and expand existing SEL tools, including multimedia resources (e.g., videos, podcasts), reflection prompts, lesson plans, activities, guides, frameworks, and articles. In our research of teachers' pre- and post-course survey responses, we found that participants demonstrated a large increase (d=.97) in having the tools needed to center, affirm, and sustain students' identities (see Duane et al., 2025 for the full study). These findings illustrate how providing concrete supports to teachers, such that teachers have what they need, can translate into meaningful SEL implementation.

Feedback Loops

Feedback loops, or the process of using information for continuous improvement, include collecting data from those at the center of the experience. CalHOPE has prioritized implementing feedback loops by collecting data at every level of the California education system– from superintendents to students. These feedback loops – such as self-evaluation frameworks, screening and assessment tools, surveys, empathy interviews, and focus groups – help guide improvement and on-the-ground practice. One example is a partnership with Tulare County Office of Education's Friday Night Live organization, which developed a series of SEL focus group protocols for young people around the state to participate in structured conversations to both build social and emotional competencies and provide important insights for improvement (visit ONLINE RESOURCE to access protocols). Youth who engaged in these focus groups appreciated the process and the dialogue that the protocols generated. In a post-focus group debrief, one youth shared, "It was really good to learn about what other people were interested in, you know, like 'oh! we share the same goal or interest.'" Thus, feedback loops can amplify youth voice in ways that contribute to a culture of improvement, provide great insights, and inform meaningful decisions at all levels.

Capacities

With partnerships and supports in place, we turn to educator *capacities*– that is, the mindsets, knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy required to implement SEL. In this section, we describe two elements of capacity: mindsets and knowledge.

Mindsets

Having an SEL mindset (positive beliefs, favorable attitudes, and sufficient motivation for SEL) is an important part of preparing for and sustaining SEL implementation. The field of

education is a maze of competing priorities filled with obstacles and ever-changing demands, but having an SEL mindset means that even when considering all of those competing school priorities, teachers still believe SEL is important. In a recent qualitative study, we explored what motivated teachers to improve their SEL practice. Participants shared they wanted to: (1) strengthen their commitment to themselves; (2) be more responsive to their students' needs; (3) improve their classroom climate; (4) become a better teacher and leader; and (5) advance efforts towards equity. (Morris et al., under review, p.16). Given these findings about teacher motivations, those who plan and provide professional learning should meet teachers where they are at, incorporate more opportunities for educators to reflect on their "why," and provide opportunities for teachers to pursue SEL in ways that are consistent with their own goals.

Knowledge

Having knowledge about SEL is an important resource for overcoming the challenges of SEL implementation. Knowledge can include explaining SEL concepts like systemic and transformative SEL and describing how SEL intersects with other educational frameworks (e.g., Culturally Responsive Practices, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support). In the earliest days of CalHOPE (winter of 2021), we conducted a study where we asked educational leaders to define SEL. Six months later, and after participating in several statewide Communities of Practice, we asked them to update or revise their definitions. In our qualitative analysis, we found that in their initial definitions, leaders emphasized popularized competency-based SEL definitions, skills rather than systems, and described SEL as an individualistic rather than a civic intervention. However, after six months of learning together, we found that many educational leaders shifted their definitions towards more systemic and transformative understandings of SEL (Eldeeb et al.,

2025). Findings suggest that sustained and collaborative learning opportunities can help build capacity for SEL implementation.

Centering Teacher Well-Being

When partnerships, supports, and capacities are in place, we believe that there may be positive impacts for teacher well-being. In fact, we've been lucky enough to learn from many teachers who have been involved in CalHOPE's efforts. As part of our work, we have had over 2,000 educators enroll in SEL Foundations (see above). Participants complete a Capstone project where they (1) implement one Adult SEL practice and two classroom-specific SEL practices, and (2) reflect on that implementation. In a recent study, we qualitatively analyzed the Adult SEL practices employed (for a digital repository of exemplar adult practices, see Duane et al., 2025b). Unsurprisingly, we found that when these participants had dedicated time to focus on themselves, an overwhelming number reported, in their project narratives, positive impacts on their well-being. Educators gave themselves "permission" to engage in (1) relationship building (e.g., attending social events, seeking out peer support); (2) lifestyle changes (e.g., sleep hygiene, movement); (3) self-reflection (e.g., journaling); (4) mindfulness (e.g., meditation, mindful awareness); and (5) boundary setting (e.g., leaving at contract time, limiting phone usage; Duane et al., 2025b).

The self-reported benefits to these teachers came from their thoughtful implementation and self-afforded "permission slips" to focus on themselves. Their success also shows up through statistical analyses, as educators' *resources for coping* significantly increased from the start to the end of the course (Duane et al., 2025a). Behind the scenes, each *Lever of System Transformation* was turning its gear to augment their success. *Partnerships* between the university, state, and practitioners across the state enabled the course to be developed and offered

at no cost to participants. *Supports* included funding for the course, training via course content, a trove of tools and resources offered, and tailored feedback from expert SEL instructors. *Capacity*-building through knowledge sharing, skill development, motivation alignment, and confidence enhancement provided the foundation for teachers to implement Adult SEL strategies. Taken together, these *Levers* created the conditions for transformation and healing.

Conclusion

The field of SEL has historically focused on asking teachers to *do* things differently without *supporting* the work differently. CalHOPE has offered an opportunity to think about – and more importantly, create the conditions for thriving in schools, system-wide. Challenges remain, and much work is left to do, but CalHOPE has provided a powerful blueprint for beginning this complex work that many believed couldn't be done. And, even for those not connected to CalHOPE or a state with robust SEL infrastructure, lessons from CalHOPE provide implications for any educator seeking to advance systemic and transformative SEL in ways that support teacher healing.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CalHOPE Student Support has coordinated efforts across California to advance SEL implementation. We thank all participants, contributors, and champions, with a special acknowledgement of County Office representatives who have expanded their work and impact. CalHOPE research is enabled by the support of Megan Mitchell, Esmeralda Michel, and Erika Hansen. Aspects of this work were funded by the California Department of Health Care Services. The contents may not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the State of California. Valerie Shapiro would like to acknowledge her W.T. Grant Foundation Scholars Award.