

Social and Emotional Learning:  
Why Students Need It.  
What Districts are Doing About It.



# Social and Emotional Learning: Why Students Need It. What Districts are Doing About It.

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## NoVo Foundation

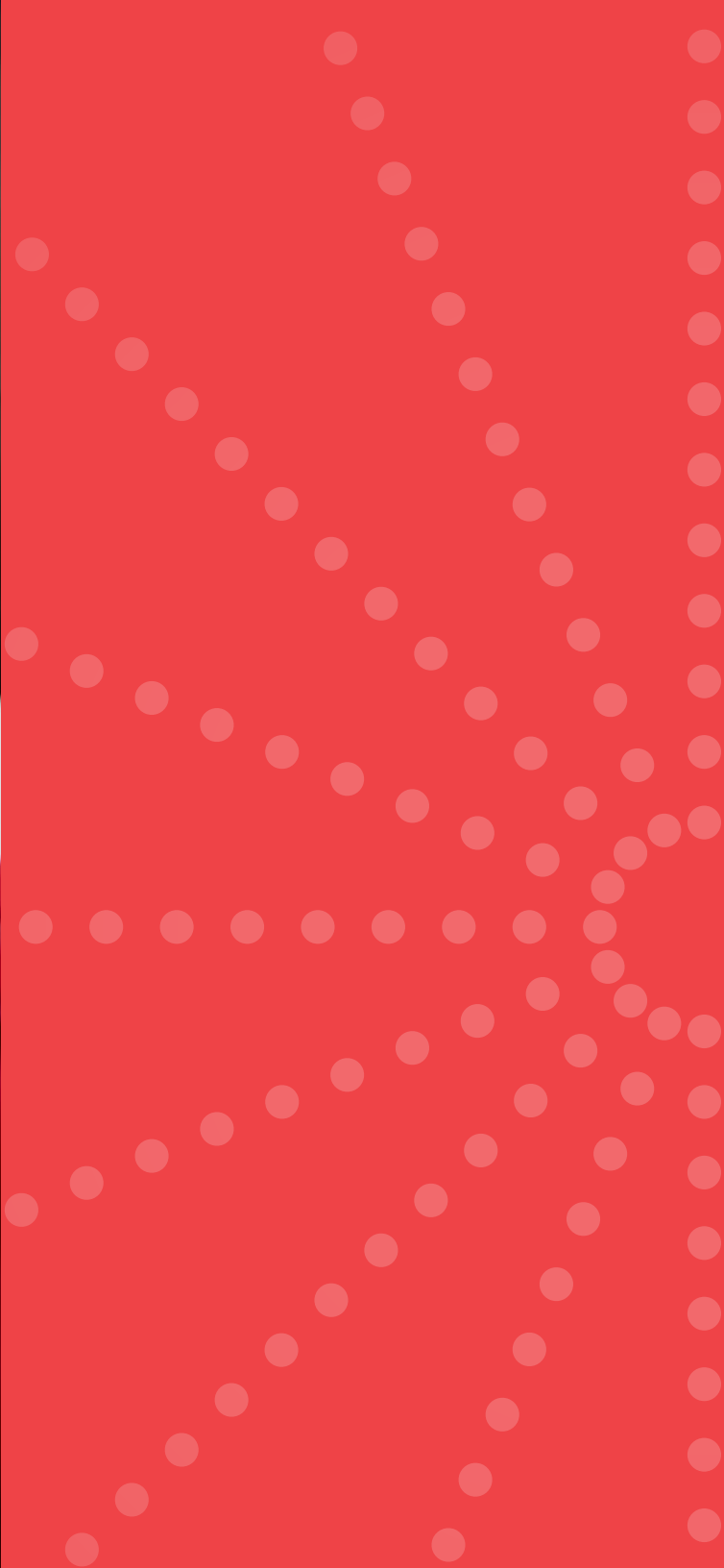
**create. change.**

NoVo Foundation is dedicated to building a more just and balanced world. Founded in 2006 by Jennifer and Peter Buffett, NoVo has become one of the largest private foundations in the world to support initiatives focused explicitly on girls and women. It also works to advance social and emotional learning, to support indigenous communities in North America, and promote local living economies. Across all of its work, the NoVo Foundation supports the development of capacities in people—individually and collectively—to help create a world based on mutual respect, collaboration, and love.

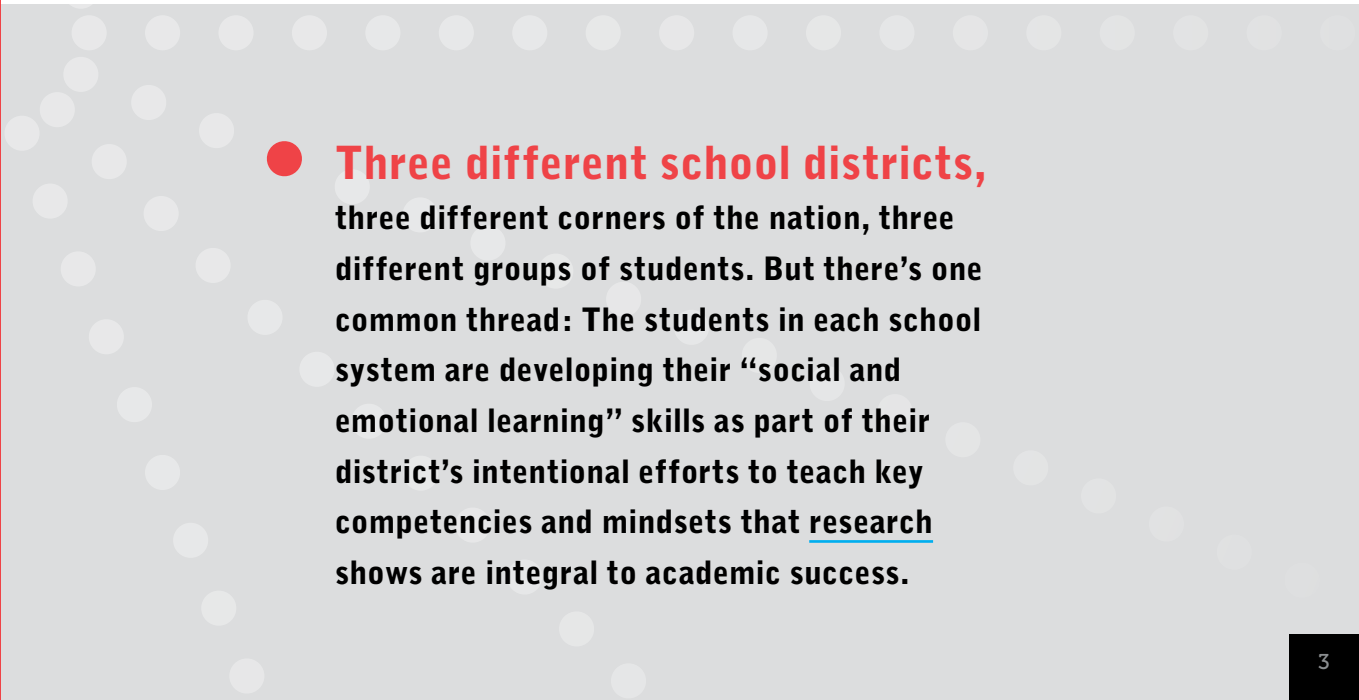
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Education First is a seasoned team of trusted advisors to the leaders responsible for delivering what many Americans want most: public education that effectively prepares all students for success in college, careers and a world of constant change. We devote our energy and expertise to improving opportunities for all children, especially low-income students and students of color. Each day, we demand excellence from ourselves so that our contributions to our clients and the field result in sustainable progress in classrooms, schools and school systems. This report is authored by Anand Vaishnav, Katie Cristol and Angie Hance of Education First.



In a classroom in **Anchorage, Alaska**, first- and second-graders brainstorm a list of conflicts – cutting in line, name-calling, swiping someone’s milk carton – and discuss strategies for resolving each. In **Sacramento, California**, high school students ask their teacher to convene a “community circle” to discuss and resolve a heated argument unfolding in real time in their classroom. In **Bridgeport, Connecticut**, students in classrooms across the city think of how to help friends who are “in the red” according to the district’s ever-present emotions quadrant, color-coded to represent different states of mind. “We could share a toy,” one boy offers.

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- **Three different school districts, three different corners of the nation, three different groups of students. But there’s one common thread: The students in each school system are developing their “social and emotional learning” skills as part of their district’s intentional efforts to teach key competencies and mindsets that research shows are integral to academic success.**



**Social and emotional learning, or SEL**, is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions; set and achieve positive goals; feel and show empathy for others; establish and maintain positive relationships; and make responsible decisions. That definition comes from the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning ([CASEL](#)), the leading national organization dedicated to advance the science, practice and policy of SEL (see Figure 1). Other organizations, such as Turnaround for Children, define such skills as “[building blocks](#)” that help students access, acquire and apply academic content (see Figure 2).

For years, schools have taught SEL skills with varying levels of intentionality. But today, more and more districts are supporting SEL as a focused strategy—not only for improving school climate and student engagement but also for improving student learning.

Across the nation, implementing SEL in classrooms takes different forms: In some school systems, it’s a full curriculum with materials and lesson plans. In other places, it’s a set of standalone SEL standards and indicators, similar to English or science standards, with schools (and sometimes teachers within those schools) given leeway on how and when they will teach and measure the standards. Still other districts implement SEL through a mix of both approaches, with schools choosing a curriculum or building their own approach to teaching SEL skills that are aligned with their district’s broader expectations of SEL. At a policy level, as the CASEL wheel in Figure 1 shows, successful

SEL implementation is reflected not only in classroom instruction, but in policies and practices on school climate, culture and partnerships with families.

This publication explores how three diverse school districts are taking their SEL strategy to scale and some of the key administrative, academic, communications and measurement decisions they face along the way. The publication begins with an overview paper that explores six key implementation questions with recommendations based on the districts’ approaches, followed by three individual case studies that introduce readers to the challenges and successes each city is experiencing with SEL implementation. Notably, this paper examines the more tactical questions and decisions districts are facing; although the broad, policy-level changes that create a context for implementation are not featured in depth here, they are equally critical for success.

Two of the districts we feature, Anchorage and Sacramento, are part of the [Collaborating Districts Initiative](#), a network of eight districts funded by the New York-based NoVo Foundation that partner with CASEL on systemic SEL implementation (see sidebar). The third district, Bridgeport, is bringing SEL to scale through implementing Yale University’s Center on Emotional Intelligence’s [RULER program](#), supported by the Tauck Family Foundation and other area funders.

The briefs provide insights, recommendations and glimpses into the ground-level challenges that will resonate with teachers, school and district administrators, policymakers, funders and advocates implementing or hoping to implement SEL.

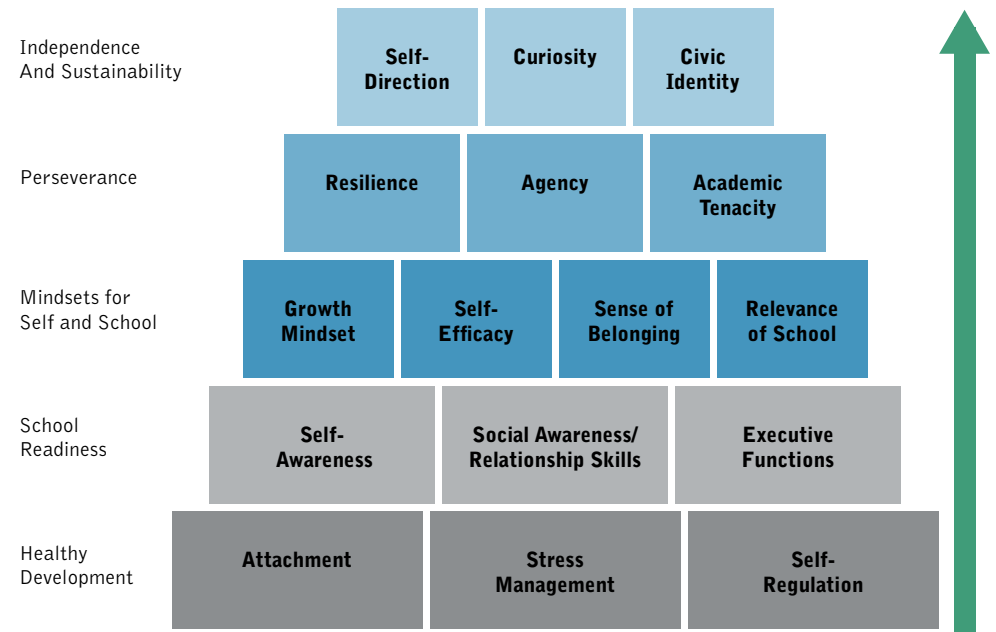


**Figure 1: CASEL's Definition of Systemic Schoolwide Social and Emotional Learning**

### CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI)

In 2011, CASEL created a national initiative to develop districts' capacities to plan, implement and monitor SEL as well as to document outcomes and lessons learned to share with other districts. CASEL is partnering with eight large urban school districts and using a theory of action that addresses the essential elements for systemic change. Those districts are Anchorage, Austin, Cleveland, Chicago, Nashville, Oakland, Sacramento and Washoe County, Nevada.

CDI districts are supported by CASEL with strategic planning, technical assistance and tools and regular cross-district collaboration opportunities, as well as grant funding from the NoVo Foundation. CASEL is extending the knowledge and tools gleaned from the CDI to other districts across the country.



**Figure 2: Turnaround for Children's Building Blocks for Learning**





# Recommendations

## Begin with a broad vision

As your district embarks upon SEL implementation, identify the problem you're trying to solve and how you think SEL will contribute to the solution. Articulating what you want to accomplish with SEL will drive necessary policy decisions about climate, discipline and family engagement as well as the choice of curriculum, how your district measures implementation and how SEL is integrated into other district priorities.

## Plan your approach

SEL should be systemic, touching leadership, school culture, student-teacher interactions, family engagement, professional development, communications and operations. Guided by a vision for SEL, districts should decide how SEL will affect system-wide policies and practices and develop an instructional approach. Cross-functional teams can inform and advocate for the policy changes that must happen before SEL touches classrooms. For more information on the types of systemic policy changes required to effectively support SEL implementation in schools, see Oberle et al [\*Establishing Systemic Social and Emotional Learning in Schools: A Framework for Schoolwide Implementation\*](#).

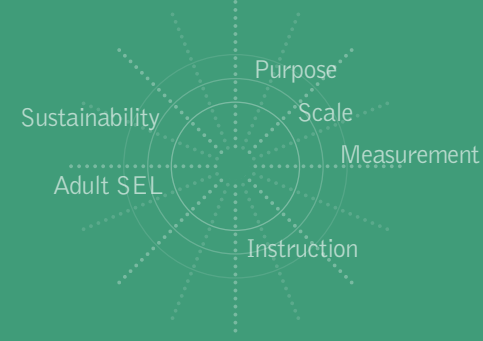
This question is foundational for any district interested in implementing SEL because the answer drives policy decisions, planning, strategy, tactics and especially evaluation. As Michael Graham, Chief Academic Officer for the Anchorage School District put it, the best planning starts with a vision: "Start with, what do we need to do? What are we after? Are we feeling like students are disengaged? Are people reporting learning climates aren't what they want? So what do we want, and what would we like to see our students doing? How would we like to see our kids interacting? And build from there."

For example, Bridgeport Public Schools every day faces overwhelming effects of students' challenging home lives. One out of every three children in Bridgeport lives in poverty, and one in five is chronically absent from school. Without interventions, those conditions make it much more difficult for students to learn. For Bridgeport, SEL was part of the solution: If students were equipped with social-emotional skills to help them navigate often-challenging personal lives, they would be in a better position to learn.

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# Bridgeport Public Schools



## Bridgeport Public Schools: The Basics

**Bridgeport is an urban, high-poverty and midsized school district in Connecticut's largest city.**

### 38 Schools

- 30 Elementary Schools (prekindergarten to 6th or pre-K to 8th)
- 6 High Schools
- 2 Alternative Schools

### 1,348 Teachers and 20,753 Students

- 99% free and reduced lunch
- 10% White
- 38% Black
- 49% Hispanic
- 13% Asian
- 13% English Language Learners
- 15% Students with IEPs

### SEL Implementation:

#### Program(s) in Use in the District:

- ▶ RULER (formally K-8, with materials and training available for high school)

**Number of Schools Currently Implementing:**  
38 – at scale

**Year SEL Implementation Started:**  
Planning began in 2013-14; training in 2014-15; full roll-out in 2015-16

# Background

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## The History

Bridgeport, Connecticut and its public schools are used to making headlines: for violence and corruption,<sup>7</sup> for chronic underfunding<sup>8</sup> and – since 2012 – for political fireworks on its School Board involving state dissolution and a court decision to reinstate the democratically-elected, if dysfunctional, public body.<sup>9</sup> Student achievement has reflected this turmoil: As of 2014-15, half of the district schools were in turnaround or focus school status under Connecticut’s (pre-ESSA) accountability system.<sup>10</sup>

But in recent years, even amid dire financial and political circumstances, Bridgeport Public Schools has begun to post some encouraging news about school climate and culture. The Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, which has reported on suspensions for six years, noted precipitous drops in in-school (50%) and out-of-school (55%) suspensions over a two-year period from 2012-13 to 2014-15. Formerly, two in ten BPS students had been suspended out-of-school; now, the numbers are one in ten.<sup>11</sup> School-based arrests declined from 185 in 2012-13 to 46 in 2014-15, and the three-year chronic absenteeism trend is down from nearly half to about a quarter of students in high schools.<sup>12</sup> The district has implemented national best practices on school climate, like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and in January 2014, hired Fran Rabinowitz, a longtime Connecticut state and

district administrator, as interim superintendent. From her previous position, leading the Hamden Public Schools, Rabinowitz brought with her a deep belief in the transformative promise of Social and Emotional Learning for adults and students.

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## The Model

In Bridgeport, SEL is essentially one program: All schools, from pre-K to high school, are implementing elements of RULER (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing and Regulating emotions), a program from the Yale Center on Emotional Intelligence (CEI). RULER is an evidence-based program that the Yale CEI has worked with Bridgeport to adapt and implement through a train-the-trainer model. The major components of RULER – referenced throughout this case study – include:

- ▶ The Charter, a document created collaboratively by members of the community, outlining how they aspire to treat each other. Throughout BPS, educators and administrators give examples of different kinds of Charters, including those created by/for faculty teams, classrooms and even families.
- ▶ The Mood Meter, a visual tool with yellow, red, blue and green quadrants that represents different clusters of emotions, helps children learn to identify and label emotions.

- ▶ The Meta-Moment, a guided step-back where students and teachers pause from their interactions in order to reflect before acting.
- ▶ The Blueprint, a conflict mediation tool that helps children and adults consider a disagreement from the other person’s perspective, as well as their own.<sup>13</sup>

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## The Players

As discussed throughout this case study, Interim Superintendent Fran Rabinowitz has been critical to effective SEL implementation, as both catalyst and continued leader. Principals, supported by a trained SEL leadership team composed of their teachers and support staff, are expected to lead implementation at the building level. BPS also has two dedicated, part-time SEL staff members: These retired Bridgeport principals, Helen Moran and Alana Callahan, both coach and support school administrators and school leadership teams, and lead an SEL Task Force of community stakeholders. The Yale CEI continues to play an important role in implementation: A Yale team member works regularly with the district SEL co-facilitators to improve their own skills and knowledge with the RULER program. Additionally, the Yale Consultation Center at the School of Medicine is an evaluation partner, tracking implementation of the program.



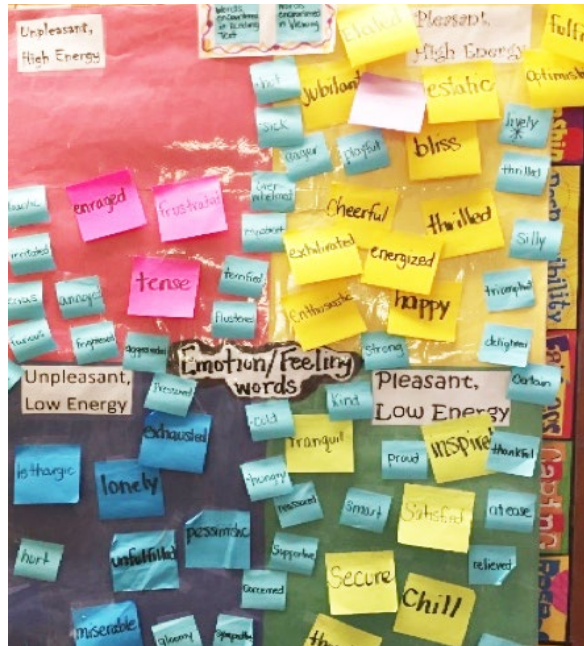
# Big Ideas from Bridgeport

## ● Instruction

### SEL and Literacy: The Language Link

The relationship between SEL and academics is a core issue for the field; SEL skills such as self-regulation and self-efficacy often support academics by preparing students' receptivity to academic learning, for example.<sup>14</sup> A number of Bridgeport educators, especially in the early grades, and administrators believe in an even tighter link: that SEL instruction can support language acquisition, and that the RULER program's emphasis on vocabulary, in particular, supports literacy skill-building.

At the Skane School, a pre-K program in Bridgeport, early education and special education teachers see clear connections between SEL instruction and literacy and verbal skills for English Language Arts content in later grades. As one Skane School teacher describes, in the early grades, "we explore language through play – learning how words feel on their tongues and feel to say, so language acquisition is really related to feeling." She adds that her students also connect their new emotional vocabulary to classroom texts and literature: "We come across words through stories – [the SEL instruction is] really substantiated by the texts that we are using with the students, [asking students] how characters are feeling and why." At Skane, where



A "Mood Meter" outside of a classroom at the PreK-6th grade Hallen School shows the range of students' emotional vocabulary.

the population is split roughly in half between students with special needs and those without, SEL has particular resonance with instruction for students with limited language and verbal skills. Skane's classrooms show a spectrum of support and scaffolding as very young learners are encouraged alternately to articulate or identify through gestures the words that best match their emotional state – and the strategies that will help them process those emotions.

This thinking about language acquisition, SEL and special populations is evident among district administrators, as well. For many Bridgeport Public Schools students, emotional and behavioral problems and learning disabilities

are intertwined, so SEL instruction presents a compelling strategy to support student learning. As the district Director of Speech, Language and Hearing Teresa Cherry-Cruz explains, "When we look at students who are language-impaired, how do we help them develop the SEL vocabulary alongside academic vocabulary? Words create your worlds and your habits – think how much more powerful our students who struggle with language would be if they had the words for their emotions." One principal at a PreK-8 school puts an even finer point on the power of language in serving high-need student populations: "Before, everything was 'I am mad,' but now [students] have the vocabulary to come into the classroom and share how they are feeling about the fact that they had to sit for an hour on the bus and haven't had breakfast yet."

Emphasizing language acquisition and vocabulary in SEL instruction lays the groundwork for more sophisticated integration of SEL content into the ELA curriculum in later grades. Bridgeport's Director of Literacy Melissa Jenkins describes how she works with teachers to "infuse elements of RULER/SEL into literacy performance tasks [related to analyzing the work of] Maya Angelou and Sandra Cisneros." Teachers should both utilize these SEL-infused performance tasks and to do explicit instruction on RULER and SEL, and they are supported by both literacy coaches and SEL facilitators to do so.

These examples all point to how SEL instruction supports ELA instruction in Bridgeport. Just as the Common Core – with its emphasis on academic vocabulary – has brought attention to the critical role vocabulary plays in content mastery,<sup>15</sup> SEL is helping Bridgeport teachers reaffirm the relationship between vocabulary and emotional regulation. As one pre-K-8 teacher reflects, other educators should “know that [social emotional skills] really can be taught, and you can help kids to learn emotional vocabulary. If you give kids the language, they will use it.”

## ● Adult SEL

### Adult SEL and Tough Conversations

Among the defining characteristics of Bridgeport’s roll-out of SEL is that the district started with the adults first. Nearly every teacher and administrator mentioned the importance of rolling out the ideas and tools of RULER to adults first. Alana Callahan, one of the SEL Co-Facilitators explains, “We spent one whole year just on adult development, so by the time we brought it into the schools, there was a lot of buy-in for how these concepts could create a professional culture.” “I think that one of the reasons why this is working so well,” offered one preK-8 teacher, is that “staff members can recognize themselves in [the RULER tools and strategies].” Beyond just the power of buy-in, Bridgeport’s experience of “starting with the grown-ups” also underscores the potential for adult SEL to facilitate and improve the kinds

of tough conversations required to change the culture and outcomes of low-performing, urban systems.

Teacher feedback and evaluation are obvious examples of difficult conversations, and Terry Carroll, the Assistant Superintendent for Teaching, Learning and Staff Development in Bridgeport, observes that adult SEL has helped educators and administrators throughout the district depersonalize and give and receive more effective feedback: “The culture in education is that people don’t always know how to take feedback well – there’s too much personalization – so having this language to give constructive feedback is important.” One of the RULER tools – the Charter – came up often as educators and administrators reflect on creating school culture among adults. As one pre-K-8 principal notes,

“I’m always referring back to, and starting the faculty meeting with, the staff Charter. Even if you’re having a tough conversation with the teacher – say there’s a conflict between two teachers – you’re referring back to the Charter, and saying, “You guys agreed that this is how you want to feel and treat each other.”

Even in some of the direst circumstances, including threats of school closures due to budget cuts and turn-around restructuring, Bridgeport’s educators and administrators cite how their own improved awareness of emotional regulation helps them lead their teams or students through difficulty. A pre-K and Kindergarten principal explains, “I reflect a lot faster now, and can think about how to ‘get out of here’ emotionally,” whereas bad administrative news used to lead her to spiral. One of the less positive accounts

#### IN THEIR OWN WORDS: ROLE-ALIKE ADVICE SUPERINTENDENT

Fran Rabinowitz, Interim Superintendent of BPS, is widely credited by her colleagues, teachers and community members as the driving force behind SEL in the district. She advises her peers that, for effective implementation, a superintendent has to lead, own and believe in SEL and communicate accountability through her/his interest and prioritization: “You have to make [SEL implementation] a priority and you have to lead the process – it’s not something that you can turn over to the social work department. If you want it to become part of the fabric of the process, it has to be led by the superintendent. If you don’t think you can give [SEL implementation] your full commitment, put it off until you can.”

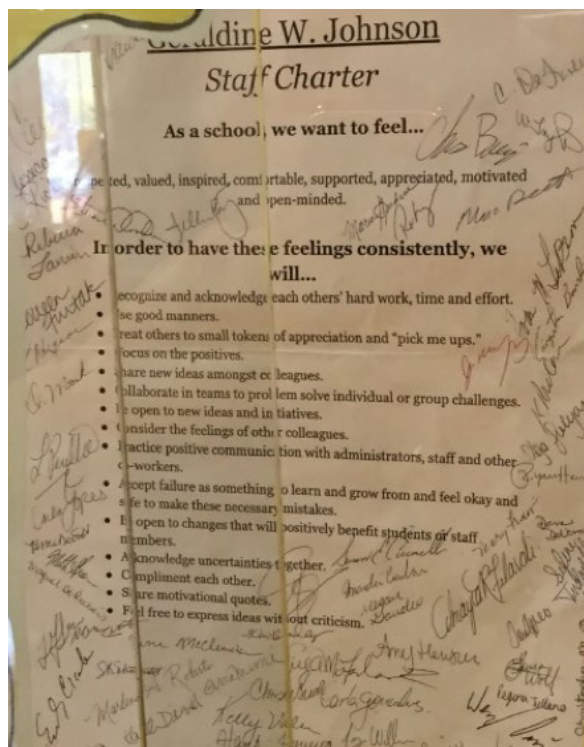
In a struggling, under-resourced district like Bridgeport, “one of the challenges [for Superintendents seeking to implement SEL] is that “there are no dollars ‘somewhere.’” Rabinowitz has spent a lot of time working with local funders, but SEL has meant real resource trade-offs for her: “I have had to let other things go that I might like to have done – conferences, speakers, etc. – to ensure [SEL] is implemented fully.” In other words, SEL comes at an opportunity cost, especially in underfunded districts; that, too, requires commitment and decision-making from the top.

of RULER implementation illustrates this point, as well: A pre-K-8 teacher shares that, “We lost some staff buy-in to RULER when we found out that we were going to be a turnaround school. I think our staff forgot to acknowledge their own feelings.” Asked to speculate about what might have been different if her school had been doing RULER for a few years at the time of the turnaround news, the teacher responded, “I do think it would have made a difference. We would have had more practice with and experience identifying and labeling, being about to authentically share with students, ‘I’m in the Blue [on the Mood Meter] today because I got stressful news,’ instead of snapping at students.”

## ● Sustainability

### Starting at the Top: Leadership, Ownership and Modeling

Effective school reforms almost always require strong district leadership, but Bridgeport Public Schools’ experience with SEL implementation illustrates the impact of the superintendent in striking ways. District leaders cite how Fran Rabinowitz literally made SEL her top priority as she assumed leadership: “It’s clear that [successful implementation] started with her vision, and her making it the first of the theories of action in the district improvement plan,<sup>16</sup>” explains one of the district’s SEL Co-Facilitators, Helen Moran. Rabinowitz also prioritized SEL in spending the scarce resource of staff time, including a leadership retreat with two days of RULER training for district staff



The staff Charter at Johnson School (preK-8). Reflecting the commitment to “adult modeling,” the Charter is on display in the building’s front hallway.

and four professional coaching sessions for the principals, as well as three coaching sessions for the school-based SEL teams of every school in the district, of every school in the district. District staff describe her as “the source of energy” and “the center of gravity” for SEL and RULER implementation. They note how, through modeling, she sets the priority informally as well as formally. “She starts all of our meetings checking in on the Mood Meter and cites often to the district Charter,” explains SEL Co-Facilitator Moran. And Assistant Superintendent for Teaching, Learning and Staff Development

Terry Carroll notes, “she asks questions and pays attention [about how implementation is going], so there’s really heightened attention.”

Bridgeport leaders also connect the Interim Superintendent’s strong leadership to the district’s ability to implement RULER at scale. Assistant Superintendent Carroll points out that “Bridgeport isn’t typically a district that can do “whole district anything” because the resources don’t go far enough. There’s a challenge of chasing grants that undermines stability of initiatives at the district level – a school will get its own grant – coupled with a very high student mobility rate (some schools have up to 50% mobility rate). But the way she has done the whole district, and the deliberate – not rushed – roll out, it’s really building, in a developmental way. That has really been key.” Her leadership was also instrumental in securing the financial support from a group of local funders, led by the Tauck Family Foundation, which enabled this district-wide push.

District-level leadership created the impetus for SEL in Bridgeport, and school-level leadership is the critical conduit for the theory of action. Consequently, the training and support provided directly to principals for implementation of RULER is married to clear expectations about how SEL will feature in school improvement planning. “The principal supervisors work very closely with principals on their school improvement plans,” reports Assistant Superintendent Carroll. “Part of what their work has been is to make sure that they are using the

tools to reinforce the alignment of [goals and activities], especially with new principals, which includes a real focus on SEL and RULER.”

This formal and informal prioritization of SEL has made a strong impression on principals, who report ownership of and commitment to modeling RULER implementation in their buildings. In a representative comment, one K-8 principal explains, “[My role as a principal] is as a facilitator. Every year we have something different: It starts with a bang, with fanfare, but come March, we don’t even know it exists. What’s different with RULER is that administrators got trained first: We saw the positive and what it could do. I chart myself [on the Mood Meter] every day on the morning

announcements.” Principals also explain how the emphasis on adult SEL has given them the language and tools to empower their staff, as well as communicate expectations. “[Through the SEL training], teachers could tell us what they wanted to feel from their administration – to feel respected – and so we could build their understanding of why [the RULER values of respect] were important to kids: You’re the administrator of your classroom,” remarked one high school principal.

Taken together, the experience of district senior staff and principals – along with reflections from teachers themselves – suggest just how influential the leadership-level commitment to SEL has been in ensuring enthusiasm for to-date-successful implementation.

## **IN THEIR OWN WORDS: ROLE-ALIKE ADVICE FUNDER**

Mirellise Vazquez, Executive Director of the Tauck Family Foundation, has organized and led a philanthropic partnership of local funders to support BPS’ implementation of SEL.

She notes that 80-85% of SEL implementation in BPS is privately funded, advising other funders interested in supporting SEL implementation that, “financially, the model is more resource-intensive upfront.” And to sustain SEL efforts beyond initial infusion of funds, she suggests that “sustainability is why the leadership’s buy-in to train-the-trainer model are so important. Adult SEL is a good model to develop the buy-in to keep SEL efforts strong and high-impact in the out years after the initial philanthropic investment.”

Vazquez explains that this kind of support requires funders to stretch and take risks, as well: “This is hard for philanthropy. We’ve said, this is the outlier in our portfolio (regarding our social investing model), and we’re holding Bridgeport to their own definition of success and outcomes.” Tauck monitors its investment in BPS and SEL, but in the absence of its usual grantee performance metrics, this monitoring requires care and commitment: Foundation staff meet quarterly with the Yale Center on Emotional Intelligence and School of Medicine researchers involved in RULER implementation to review tracking and interim measures like logs and visit notes, as well as progress toward meeting agreed-upon goals and milestones. Tauck also looks to measures like climate surveys, and proxies like suspension measures and chronic absenteeism, to ensure that its investment in SEL is yielding results.

# Conclusion

Bridgeport educators and administrators, community stakeholders and parents all make an impassioned case for the special importance of SEL in a district and city riven by political conflict, funding crises and urban poverty. As one high school teacher framed her advice to peers in similarly challenged schools: “Don’t have that stereotype of the urban high schooler in your mind: Oh, that boy is so tough, he’s not going to want to talk about his feelings. That boy who is so tough is exactly who wants to talk about his feelings.”

The leadership of Bridgeport Public Schools (from the Superintendent through the SEL co-facilitators and school principals), working with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, have created not just an opportunity to “talk about feelings” in this challenged school district: They have established a structured system, at scale, for educators to make connections between emotions, literacy and language acquisition. They also have created a set of tools and skills among adults that are enabling more productive interactions – and potentially, improving perseverance – in an environment with no shortage of difficult challenges ahead.



# Case Study Endnotes

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