CASEL Guide to
Schoolwide SEL

Focus Area 3
Community Partnerships

Leverage strategic and aligned community partnerships that ensure students receive consistent SEL supports, increase access to a broad range of community services, and expand the professional learning opportunities for SEL.

Community organizations that partner directly with schools offer students opportunities to practice the SEL skills they are learning at home, throughout the school day, and in their afterschool programming. It is important that school-community partnerships are carefully and strategically cultivated and align on a common language, strategies, and communication around SEL-related efforts and initiatives. Community organizations, in partnership with the principal and the SEL team, can foster this alignment for seamless student support.

Community partners might include:

- Out-of-school time providers (before and after school programs).
- Community-based nonprofit organizations.
- Health care providers.
- University research centers or colleges of education.
- Mission-driven foundations.
- Governmental agencies.
- Local business.
- Other institutions that can connect students to their broader communities.

If you have already begun to develop community partnerships for SEL, use the rubric or the questions below to identify areas for continuous improvement:

Has the school has developed strategic and aligned community partnerships to support schoolwide SEL?

Are the school and community partners familiar with one another's approach to SEL?

Have the school and SEL-related community partners worked to align and integrate supports where possible?

Do these partnerships lead to increased student and family access to a broad range of community services and expand the professional learning opportunities for SEL?

Schools can strategically leverage community partnerships to deepen their systemic SEL implementation. Community partnerships may create opportunities for students to:

- Participate in cross-age peer tutoring and self-directed activities that build their self-management and help them make new friends, learn about their communities, and participate in service learning (social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making).
- Interact with people of varying backgrounds, ages, concerns, and priorities (understanding, empathy, and cultural awareness).
- Contribute to the larger community (social awareness and responsible decision-making).
- Gain mentorship from a caring adult (relationship skills).

Students who have more targeted or intensive needs, such as those who have experienced homelessness or other kinds of trauma, may also find connection, belonging, and support through structured involvement in the community. Students grow to understand that they are part of the broader, supportive community and feel connected to its improvement and success (Cohen, 2006).

To ensure regular communication and collaboration, include community partners on the school's SEL team. SEL team meetings can then be leveraged for schools and community partners to align their work to support SEL so their efforts are not fragmented or redundant. This can include aligning expectations, shared agreements, and language used for social and emotional learning, and sharing practices that contribute to a positive environment.

Download Tool
Partnering with Community Organizations to Support SEL

This tool can help the SEL team identify ways to partner with community organizations toward a common goal of advancing social and emotional learning.

Download Tool
Coordinating SEL work with Community Partners

This tool offers guidance for schools that already work with many community partners, to deepen SEL alignment and practice and plan for collaborative communication and continuous improvement.

Below you'll find additional information about Key Partnership Opportunities:

Out-of-School Time Partnerships

Many out-of-school time (OST) providers have focused their work around social and emotional development and are increasingly prioritizing SEL. While in-school educators and OST providers may differ in their approaches to SEL, their partnership and alignment around SEL is essential (American Institutes for Research, 2015). OST providers are important partners who can bring knowledge, framing, and resources to inform SEL implementation and help ensure alignment across students' days, both during and after school.

Alignment between school and OST partners around SEL may include using a shared language, aligning procedures and expectations, and reinforcing lessons. For example, if OST providers are using project-based learning, classroom teachers can use the same language and structures. Similarly, if peace areas are used during the school day, they can also be used during out-of-school time by employing the same routines and procedures that youth already know to follow. Tools and practices from evidence-based SEL programs can also be shared across settings. School day and OST partners can also align practices by leveraging the Three Signature Practices for SEL, which promote community building and deeper engagement. Consistency in how meetings, classroom lessons and programming are structured – beginning with a welcoming inclusion activity, facilitating engaging practices, and wrapping up the time with an optimistic closure – can be a powerful example of alignment. (See introductory video – SEL 3 Signature Practices in Out-of-School Time)

In addition, SEL presents a powerful avenue for building collaboration between school and OST partners serving the same youth. Beyond aligning practices, including OST partners on school-based SEL teams, providing combined or aligned professional learning to both school and OST partners, and looking for additional opportunities to build relationships among the staff in both settings can build strong systems for SEL that transcend the school day.

Download Tool
Guiding Questions for Building Strong Partnerships between School Day and Out-of-School Time Educators

These guiding questions support work with out-of-school time (OST) staff and planning for deepening OST partnerships as part of continuous improvement.

More information on Aligning SEL and Out-of-School Time:

- Beyond the Bell: Turning Research into Action in Afterschool and Expanded Learning
- The In-School and Afterschool Social and Emotional Learning Connection: A Planning Tool
- Calls for Coaches: Coaching Social and Emotional Skills in Youth Sports
- Finding Common Ground: Connecting Social and Emotional Learning During and Beyond the School Day
- Social and Emotional Learning in Out-of-School Time Settings

- Linking Schools and Afterschool Through Social and Emotional Learning

Service Learning Partnerships

Service learning can be designed to meet real needs within the community and provide students with ongoing opportunities to reflect on both the significance of their service and the skills required to meet the community's needs (Berman, 2005). Schools can help students enhance SEL through service learning through the following efforts:

- Helping students engage with their community. Identity and community are central themes in the lives of young people, especially during adolescence. Helping students learn more about this important part of themselves promotes both self-awareness and social awareness. Students can explore their community's history, assets, and needs through community research, interviews, and community tours.
- Identify community partners. Reach out to organizations and advocacy groups that specialize in services aligned with SEL, youth health and development, academic achievement, and/or school success. These may include museums, libraries, service-oriented nonprofits such as food banks or builders of affordable housing, mentoring or tutoring groups, senior organizations, cultural organizations, and youth and family organizations. Locate potential partners by accessing the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.
- Identify and plan service-learning opportunities. Explore opportunities for student volunteerism, apprenticeships, jobs, or summer internships. Find ways for students to learn about how organizations operate, what it takes to be a leader in such an environment, and what the organization does to help support their community. For more about how to design service-learning projects, visit any of the following resources: Generator School Network, Connecting the Classroom and Community, Youth.gov's Service-Learning Home Page, and the Corporation for National & Community Service.

Download Tool
Cultivating Students' Community Awareness

This tool provides guidance for encouraging students to explore their connection to their community.

Student-Support Partnerships

Community partners often provide supports and interventions to students for whom schoolwide and classroom supports are not enough. Often, these are part of a larger MTSS framework. These supports are provided during or after school hours, typically at no cost to the student. Some of these services can be obtained by schools through grants, but schools may need to create agreements with community partners that involve paying for services. Community partners may be able to offer:

- Tutoring
- Mentoring
- Counseling services (family or individual)
- Small-group counseling
- Mental and behavioral health supports
- Addiction services

Up Next: Focus Area 4 - Practice Continuous Improvement