

BEYOND THE MASK

Promoting Transformation and Healing in School Reopening

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING SUPPORTS

By Kayla Tawa

THE CHALLENGE

Schools should prioritize Tier 1 supports, such as universal mental health screenings, wellbeing checkups, mental health literacy programs, and [social-emotional learning](#).ⁱ Tier 1 supports are provided to all students, integrated into the school day, and focus on prevention, early identification, and intervention.

The U.S. Department of Education required each state to submit a reopening plan outlining how they were using and planned on using [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief \(ESSER\) funds](#). The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) conducted an analysis of 37 state plans to better understand if and how schools were prioritizing Tier 1 social and emotional learning supports.

In their reopening plans, the U.S. Department of Education asked schools to explain how they planned on meeting the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students. Social-emotional learning (SEL) was a key strategy identified by many states. However, most states are not explicitly prioritizing racial equity in these supports. When divorced from equity, SEL can harm students of color by reinforcing white values and asking students to constrict their identities.ⁱⁱ

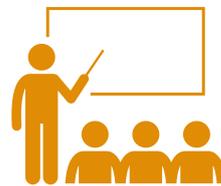
KEY POLICY TOOLS



Grants



Technical Assistance



Training



Partnership



Guidance



Data Collection



Resource Development



New Positions

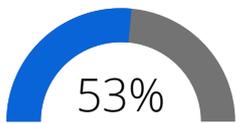


FG TRADE / GETTY IMAGES

STATE SPOTLIGHTS



MONTANA:ⁱⁱⁱ Making Initial Investments in SEL



Title I Schools*



students of color

Based on stakeholder input, Montana identified integrating social and emotional learning as the state’s top strategy to meet the needs of students during the pandemic. ESSER funding gave Montana the opportunity to invest in student mental health and SEL.

Key Uses of ESSER Funds:

- Allocated **\$88,215 of ESSER I** funds to mental health services;
- Increased **staff ability** to provide **technical assistance** and **professional development** to schools on preventative approaches by strengthening their relationship with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL is a national collaborative that provides knowledge about social-emotional learning. CASEL created an SEL framework that outlines five key SEL competencies, the CASEL 5;^{iv}
- Created a school mental health **website** for educators focused on trauma-informed schools, SEL, educator self-care, and **school mental health resources**;^v and
- Held **professional development** meetings for Montana school counselors focused on counseling, screening, and SEL.

STATE SPOTLIGHTS

Initial investment in SEL



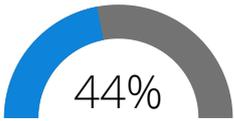
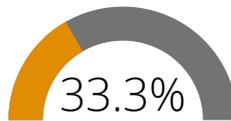
Transformational SEL

MONTANA

MICHIGAN

CONNECTICUT

NEW YORK


MICHIGAN:^{vi} Building Momentum around Student Mental Health and Investing in Sustainable SEL

Title I Schools*

students of color

Prior to the pandemic, student mental health needs in Michigan were considerable and often unmet due to lack of resources and infrastructure, despite educator concerns. In 2018, no resources for school-based mental health were allocated to local districts.

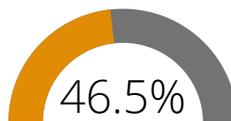
While the pandemic intensified the need for mental health supports, it also helped the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), educators, and mental health providers raise consciousness in the state about the importance of providing mental

health resources on campus. For FY 2021, the annual appropriation for school mental health and support services rose from \$30 million (FY 2019) to \$35.6 million, and then by an additional \$20 million in a budget supplemental. The governor is proposing a \$50 million increase for the coming year.

Key Uses of ESSER Funds:

- Used **\$7.6 million of State Education Agency (SEA) Reserve from ESSER I** to provide mental health services and supports;
- Allocated **\$1.5 million in GEER I Grant Awards** for statewide mental health and SEL supports;
- Established an SEL **network of stakeholders** with input from national experts;
- Established “Children Matter. You Matter. Learn SEL,” to increase baseline knowledge among educators and administrators through **online modules**; and
- Developed an **action toolkit** that offers districts tools and strategies to advance SEL.


CONNECTICUT:^{vii} Bolstering an Already Strong SEL Program

Title I Schools*

students of color

Prior to the pandemic, Connecticut had a robust SEL program. The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) has “set the vision that each school in the state would have the mental health supports needed for their students and staff.” Connecticut has developed a comprehensive school counseling framework, which focuses on tiered supports; SEL; evaluating implementation based on student outcomes; developmentally appropriate school counseling; and using data to inform decision-making and address equity.

Key Uses of ESSER Funds:

- Conducted a **statewide landscape survey** of Connecticut public schools to provide CSDE with a snapshot of the SEL work already occurring;
- **Procured the Devereux Student Strength Assessment (DESSA) system.**^{viii} DESSA screens students for SEL attributes aligned with the competencies outlined by CASEL;
- **Developed components of SEL habits** for K-3 and working on developing SEL components for grades 4-12;
- Created SEL **learning hubs** which provide on-demand **resources** to help develop compassionate learning spaces that provide social-emotional wellbeing;
- Updated the teacher education and mentoring (TEAM) program to include **modules** on SEL, equity, and cultural competency; and
- Will use the balance of their ESSER II state-level set-aside to, among other activities, provide **professional development** for implementation of a Black and Latino Studies curriculum, and support LEAs to develop SEL systems and integrate them with other districts.

STATE SPOTLIGHTS

Initial investment in SEL



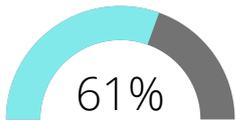
Transformational SEL

MONTANA

MICHIGAN

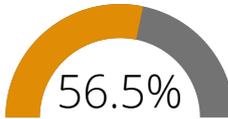
CONNECTICUT

NEW YORK

NEW YORK:^{ix} Prioritizing Transformative SEL

61%

Title I Schools*



56.5%

students of color

New York recognizes SEL as one component of their broader Culturally Relevant Sustaining Education (CRSE) framework. When paired with CRSE, SEL becomes transformative. Transformative SEL is “a process in which young people and adults build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences, learn to critically examine the root causes of inequity, and develop collaborative solutions to community and societal problems.” It can help address inequity by empowering young people to co-create thriving schools with adults, contributing to safe, healthy, and just communities.

Key Uses of ESSER Funds:

- Offered **grants to LEAs** to integrate SEL and CRSE in their approaches to addressing lost instructional time and pre-existing performance gaps;
 - Convened a **workgroup** comprised of internal New York State Education Department (NYSED) partners; New York City Department of Education; parents; guardians; students; Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES); and teachers to help guide SEL and CRSE implementation; and
- ▶ **Updated definition and framework** for SEL to incorporate culturally sustaining elements, in line with revised CASEL competencies, and updated equity-focused SEL guidance to better support young people.
- New York is particularly forward-thinking in its approach to cultural sensitivity. Using ESSER funding to update their SEL framework to be more culturally sustaining aligns with CLASP’s **Criminalization to Healing** framework for decriminalizing education and reimagining safety in schools. Notably, CLASP advocates for increased access to culturally sustaining mental health supports in schools and the **removal of law enforcement officers** from schools. Officers create a hostile learning environmentx leading to less student engagement and a higher dropout rate.xi For SEL to be truly transformative, students cannot be policed while on campus. CLASP encourages states to remove law enforcement from their schools as a key tenant of Transformative SEL.

KEY RECOMMENDATION: PRIORITIZE EQUITY IN SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

When divorced from racial equity, Tier 1 supports, particularly SEL, can further harm students of color and LGBTQIA+ students. SEL can reaffirm white, patriarchal, heteronormative, and ableist values and ask young people to “manage” their emotions and “constrict” their identities.^{xii}

SEL should be strengths-based and work toward a positive sense of self-esteem, wellbeing, and social inclusion. Social connection and community wellbeing should be prioritized, as individual wellbeing is integrally linked to the wellness of the entire community.^{xiii} The Community for Just Schools Fund (CJSF) outlines what culturally-affirming social and emotional learning (SEL) looks like. They note that culturally-affirming SEL allows students to embrace their full humanity and is about “reclaiming our relationships with ourselves, our emotions, our ancestors, our spirituality, our creativity, our land, and our relationships with others.”^{xiv} SEL should not be hierarchal, transactional, or disciplinary.

When equity is centered in implementation, schools can address collective healing and community wellness by working toward addressing the social determinants of health (SDOH), like racism and discrimination, food and housing insecurity, and built environment. Schools should prioritize understanding and responding to how SDOH are impacting their students’ health and wellbeing.^{xv} In recognizing the ways in which SDOH impact student mental health and wellbeing, schools can better support students through programs that respond to these challenges.

*TITLE I AND ENROLLMENT DATA NOTES & SOURCES

Title I Schools: At least 40% of students are low-income

Title I data, 2015-2016

Enrollment data: 2017-2018

Sources:

Title I (National Center for Education Statistics) https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018052/tables/table_03.asp

Enrollment (Office of Civil Rights) <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/resources/downloaddatafile>

ENDNOTES

[i] http://www.schoolmentalhealth.org/media/SOM/Microsites/NCSMH/Documents/Bainum/Advancing-CSMHS_September-2019.pdf

[ii] <https://www.cjsfund.org/reclaimsel>

x

[iii] <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/06/Montana-ARP-ESSER-State-Plan.pdf>

[iv] <https://casel.org/>

[v] <https://opi.mt.gov/Educators/School-Climate-StudentWellness/School-Mental-Health>

[vi] <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/06/Michigan-ARP-ESSER-State-Plan.pdf>

[vii] <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/06/Connecticut-ARP-ESSER-State-Plan.pdf>

[viii] <https://www.kaplanco.com/content/products/DESSAIntroduction.pdf>

[ix] <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/06/New-York-ARP-ESSER-Application.pdf>

[x] <https://advancementproject.org/wp-content/uploads/WCTLweb/index.html#page=1>

[xi] <https://www.clasp.org/blog/defund-police-schools-and-expand-school-based-mental-health>

[xii] <https://www.cjsfund.org/reclaimsel>

[xiii] https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2021/01/2020_Core%20Principles%20to%20Reframe%20Mental%20and%20Behavioral%20Health%20Policy.pdf

[xiv] <https://www.cjsfund.org/reclaimsel>

[xv] https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2021/01/2020_Core%20Principles%20to%20Reframe%20Mental%20and%20Behavioral%20Health%20Policy.pdf