*CORE Districts plumb the possibilities of using holistic measures to improve schools.*

# Measures of SEL and School Climate in California

**Taylor Allbright and Heather Hough**

California's CORE Districts—a consortium of eight school districts serving a racially and socioeconomically diverse population of over one million students—have since 2014 led the way in deploying measures of social and emotional learning (SEL) and school climate and culture. Influenced by surging interest and research support over the past decade, these districts have collected data in hopes of continuously improving how their K-12 schools address the social and emotional dimensions of student development.

In recent years, many advocates have called for schools to pay greater attention to holistic aspects of schooling, arguing for whole-child education,[1] attention to noncognitive factors,[2] and programming to support student SEL.[3] Pointing to research showing that social-emotional competencies are strong predictors of academic and career success,[4] many have suggested that a greater focus on student social-emotional development will translate to higher academic achievement and a reduction in racial and socioeconomic outcome gaps.

Others have called for attention to SEL for its own sake, arguing that these competencies support individual and collective well-being. Still others have questioned whether the SEL conversation obscures larger systemic forces that contribute to educational inequity or perpetuates deficit-based views of students of color.[5]

In parallel, many advocates have argued for increased attention to school climate and culture, suggesting that a school environment characterized by healthy relationships and a strong sense of belonging will contribute to students' overall well-being as well as their academic success. Others have noted that factors such as educators' implicit bias and inadequate resources may contribute to hostile climates in schools serving low-income communities of color.[6]

Moreover, leading researchers have suggested that attention to school culture and climate may be key in reducing exclusionary discipline, particularly in schools serving black, Latinx, and Native American youth.[7] This connection is particularly important, as research shows that the constructs of SEL and school culture/climate may also be interrelated. A school environment characterized by safety and belonging may be better at promoting students' social-emotional development. Meanwhile, students with strong social-emotional skills may be better able to build the positive relationships necessary for a strong school climate.[8]

Practitioners and policymakers across several states have supported initiatives to further more holistic approaches to education. For example, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) reported that it is collaborating with over 30 states and one U.S. territory to implement SEL supports such as standards and implementation guidance.[9] Many other districts have adopted SEL-specific curricula, behavior management and disciplinary reforms, or instituted professional development on topics such as trauma-informed practices, all with the intention of addressing students' SEL or schools' climate and culture or both.

California's CORE Districts first developed SEL and school climate measures for use in their shared accountability system under a waiver of No Child Left Behind regulations. When the 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) rendered the waiver moot, the districts elected to continue collecting these data.

Through a collaborative process involving teachers, school and district administrators, and SEL and school climate experts, the CORE Districts created survey instruments for student self-reports of four SEL competencies: growth mind-set, self-efficacy, self-management, and social awareness.[10] The climate and culture survey was developed in a similar fashion, modifying and building from

**Box 1. School-Level Practices Intended to Support SEL**

| SEL competency | |
|---|---|
| Growth mind-set | The belief that one's abilities can grow with effort. Students with a growth mindset see effort as necessary for success, embrace challenges, learn from criticism, and persist in the face of setbacks. |
| Self-efficacy | The belief in one's own ability to succeed in achieving an outcome or reaching a goal. Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and environment. |
| Self-management | The ability to regulate one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, delaying gratification, motivating oneself, and setting and working towards personal and academic goals. |
| Social awareness | The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports. |
| **Culture and climate** | |
| Support for academic learning | High scores on this construct indicate that survey respondents feel that the climate is conducive to learning and that teachers use supportive practices, such as encouragement and constructive feedback, varied opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills, and support for risk-taking and independent thinking. Respondents report that the atmosphere is conducive to dialog and questioning, academic challenge, and individual attention to support differentiated learning. |
| Sense of belonging and school connectedness | High scores on this construct indicate that survey respondents report a positive sense of being accepted, valued, and included by others (teacher and peers) in all school settings. Students and parents report feeling welcome at the school. |
| Knowledge and perceived fairness of discipline rules and norms | This construct measures the extent to which survey respondents report clearly communicated rules and expectations about student and adult behavior—especially regarding physical violence, verbal abuse or harassment, and teasing—clear and consistent enforcement, and norms for adult intervention. |
| Safety | This construct measures the extent to which students and adults report feeling safe at school and around school, including feeling safe from verbal abuse, teasing, or exclusion by others in the school. |

existing California state surveys11 to measure student, staff, and parent perceptions of the school's support for academic learning, connectedness and belonging, knowledge and fairness of rules and discipline, and school safety (see definitions in box 1).

## What Survey Data Reveal

CORE's survey marked the first at-scale administration of SEL measures. Before CORE began this work in 2014, the field knew little about how changes in students' SEL might be reflected in self-report measures, how SEL and school climate are related to each other and to student outcomes, or how much schools and educators might actually affect such measures. For the last several years, Policy Analysis for California Education has led a research partnership with CORE to conduct practitioner- and policy-relevant research on the properties and potential uses of these large-scale SEL measures.[12]

**We can explain more of the differences in students' SEL depending on the classroom they are in, compared with just the school they attend.**

Over the course of our research, we have found that CORE's SEL measures are related to other outcomes educators care about—academic assessments, chronic absenteeism, and suspension rates—but that students' self-reported SEL does not consistently increase over time, with pretty marked drops as students enter middle school.[13] We also found that student reports of their SEL are related to a school's culture and climate (as reported by students, staff, and parents), providing an indication that school policies and practices influence students' mind-sets about learning. Across student-reported SEL and climate and culture, we found gaps in perceptions of school climate and culture among different gender, socioeconomic, and racial and ethnic student subgroups, showing that students within the same school have vastly different experiences based on their backgrounds and characteristics.[14]

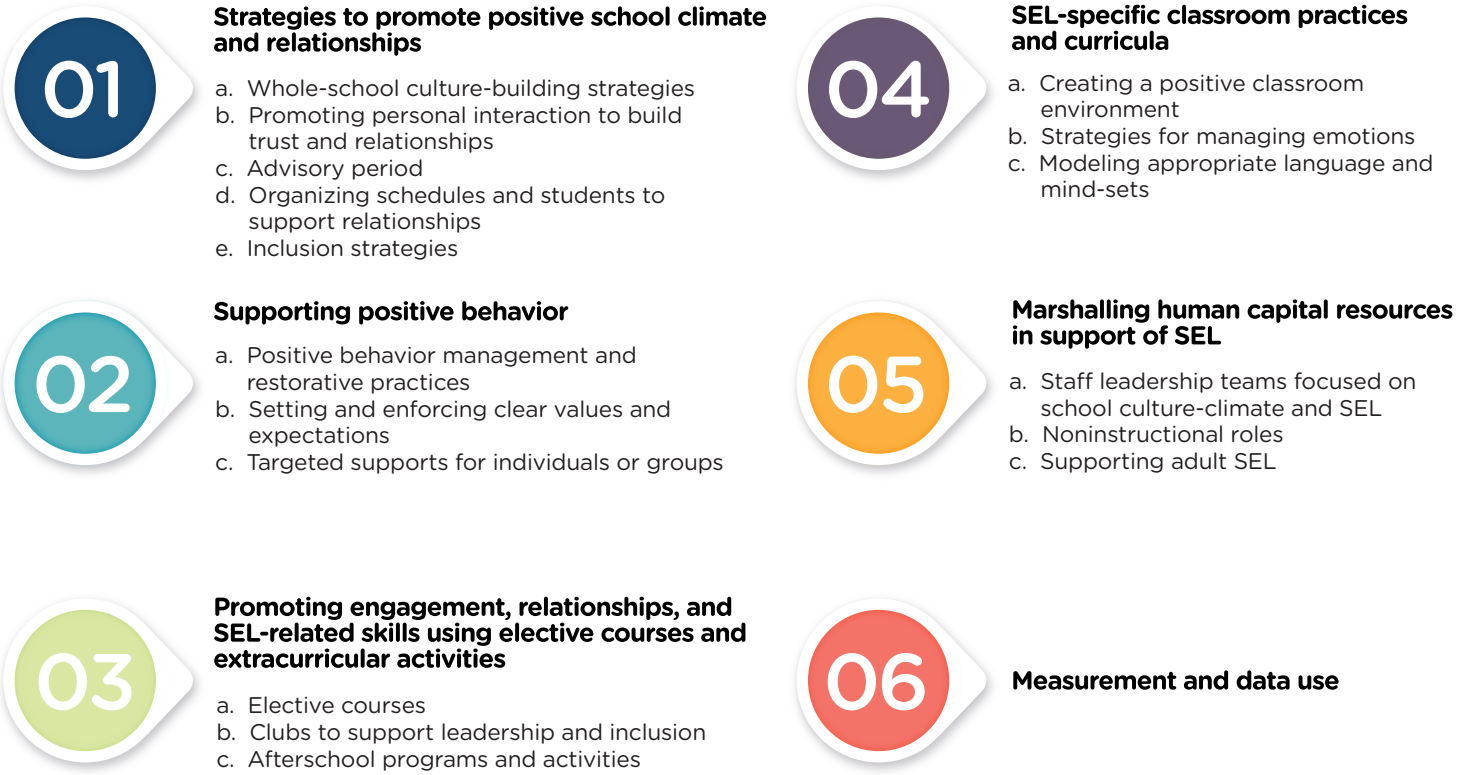
Learning about students' responses on these SEL measures is a crucial first step to understand appropriate, valid uses of the measures. But the most important question to ask is whether teachers and schools have an impact on these measures. Our research suggests that they can. We find that we can explain more of the differences in students' SEL depending on the classroom they are in, compared with just the school they attend, which suggests classroom contexts might be especially important for affecting students' SEL development. We also see that the impact a school has on students' SEL over the course of a school year may not be stable from one year to the next—although some schools having the largest (and the smallest) impacts may be more consistent than schools that are in the middle.[15]

It was by studying some of these consistently high-impact schools that we learned what practices teachers and school leaders enacted to positively support students' SEL. Using a "positive outliers" research design, our team identified 10 middle schools that scored in the top quartile in SEL self-reports among black and/or Latinx students in both the 2014–15 and 2015–16 surveys.[16] After interviewing dozens of teachers, leaders, and staff in these schools and districts, along with many hours of school and classroom observation, our team gained valuable insight into how educators are enacting SEL support in daily practice. As this was an exploratory qualitative study, our findings did not speak to causal relationships: We were unable to assert whether a particular practice caused particular SEL outcomes. However, these data did shed light on some of the day-to-day practices educators use to promote SEL, laying the foundation for future research in this area.

We unearthed six categories of school-level practices that practitioners described as advancing SEL (figure 1). First, educators in these positive outlier schools intentionally promoted positive relationships such as schoolwide strategies to establish school culture during the first two weeks of the year, leveraging advisory periods for relationship-building activities, and organizing student clubs that focused on building community. Similarly, school-level educators invested in systems that supported positive student behavior, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and restorative justice. Third, teachers and leaders leveraged electives and extracurriculars—clubs, afterschool programs, athletics, and music—to promote relationship building and social-emotional development. Schools also incorporated SEL support in the classroom, such as teacher efforts to celebrate mistakes and model a growth mind-set.

**Figure 1. School-Level Practices Intended to Support SEL**

***At the school level, we identified six common and overlapping practices intended to support student SEL. These include:***




In a fifth category of practices, schools invested in their staff capacity for SEL support by establishing SEL-specific teams, incorporating SEL in the work of noninstructional staff, and providing professional development on SEL topics. Finally, schools employed a variety of measurement and data analysis tools to monitor their SEL support efforts, including CORE surveys, teacher-developed surveys, and observational data. District leaders were also influential, providing schools with frameworks such as SEL standards, staff and curricula, and tools for measurement and data use to advance SEL practices at the school level.

## Challenges for CORE District Schools

Our exploratory study of these outliers also revealed two key challenges regarding SEL efforts. First, interviewees articulated many different understandings of what "social-emotional learning" was and how it should be supported. For some, the concepts of SEL and climate and culture were interchangeable, and SEL was defined as a safe, inclusive school climate. For others, SEL was primarily about mental health, such as interventions to address student anxiety and depression. Still others defined SEL as students' ability to adhere to school behavior rules, while some educators described SEL as addressing the varied physical, emotional, and academic needs of "the whole child."

These many SEL definitions reflect the complex, multifaceted nature of this work. Yet at the same time, these multiple, sometimes conflicting definitions could create ambiguity and confusion when it comes to enacting SEL practices across a district or school site.

Another common challenge across school sites was inconsistency in the implementation of SEL. While each school featured numerous practices that educators associated with SEL goals, these practices were often unique to a particular teacher, classroom, or school activity.

Often, SEL practices seemed to be instituted by individual educators rather than carried out as part of a school- or districtwide vision. In a notable exception, one district had crafted an official SEL strategy, including a definition and standards that were incorporated into principal, teacher, and school evaluations. In sum, our data suggest that building coherence around SEL supports may be an important opportunity for improvement in many schools and districts.

Overall, the experiences of the CORE Districts reveal that measuring SEL and school culture and climate can be a powerful force for focusing attention on holistic dimensions of schooling. These data shed light on practices educators might undertake to create healthier, more caring school environments, and they have also illuminated important challenges in undertaking this work.

Leaders must be thoughtful in how these data are used and interpreted. As with any measurement data, SEL and climate surveys can be misused in ways that perpetuate deficit-based views of students of color and low-income students.[17] Criticizing students or their families for lacking SEL skills such as "self-management" or "social awareness" could reinforce harmful stereotypes and prevent educators from examining the systemic forces that shape students' educational experiences. Leaders at all levels must take care to maintain an asset-based perspective of students and communities in data use practices and to employ SEL and climate surveys as tools for school improvement. To this end, we recommend the following for local and state leaders:

**Focus on equity.** On both SEL and school climate measures, there are significant gaps between student groups even within schools, highlighting the need for schools to understand these disparities and work to eliminate them. New measures present opportunities to understand how schools are serving diverse students and can prompt educators and stakeholders to have honest conversations about how to develop inclusive, equitable school environments. For example, a large body of research has demonstrated that African American students are treated differently than their peers, including higher rates of disciplinary action and special education designation and lower expectations.[18] This differential treatment often has the effect of making such students feel less safe in school and less connected to their peers and teachers.[19] Thus, in reviewing survey data, educators need to consider the inequitable treatment that may lead to differences in measures and develop interventions that address this root cause. State leaders can advance an equity focus by requiring or incentivizing the disaggregation of data by student subgroup and encouraging the development of indicators that highlight differences in access or opportunity.[20]

**Stress an improvement mind-set.** The guiding principle of the CORE Districts in their use of multiple measures is that data should be a "flashlight not a hammer." That is, what indicators reveal about school performance should be used to help them improve and not to scapegoat or punish. Indeed, there is growing agreement among policymakers, school and district leaders, and researchers that the most important use of school performance measures should be in driving continuous improvement at the local and state levels.[21] However, for data to truly be used for improvement, all those involved must approach its use with an improvement mind-set.[22] Without a real, systemic focus on improvement, there will inevitably be pressure to game any new measure. While distortive practice is certainly possible on academic outcomes as well,[23] survey-based indicators are arguably more sensitive to manipulation. State leaders can develop this culture from the top by modeling the use of data for learning, and by not imposing sanctions based on how districts and schools perform.

**Use multiple measures in concert.** The inclusion of additional measures in an expanded school performance measurement system is intended to provide a more comprehensive picture of a school's successes and challenges that may be used for many purposes by various stakeholders.[24] The move to multiple measures under ESSA is undoubtedly better for students and schools, as all stakeholders will now be able to support schools toward this more comprehensive view of performance.

However, multiple measures also introduce complexity. Our research indicates that different indicators measure very different aspects of school performance, illuminating different dimensions of schools' strengths and weaknesses. If a central goal of ESSA is to broaden

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**New measures present opportunities to understand how schools are serving diverse students.**

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our conception of school performance to improve schools on all of these dimensions, system leaders will need to develop comprehensive approaches to school improvement that take into account all of the information the various metrics provide. These measurement systems being developed across the country will need to be paired with a strong, comprehensive approach to improvement at all levels of the system. State leaders can, and should, provide clear guidance to educators and families about how to interpret and use multiple measures.

Ultimately, when used with careful intention, the measurement of constructs such as SEL and culture and climate have great potential for helping students feel safe and cared for and for priming them to be successful in school. ■

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