

STUDY OF LEARNING RENEWAL

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs for Supporting Pandemic Recovery With the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE): Year 1 Implementation Study Report



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Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and its state and nonprofit partners developed a plan for recovery and reconnection. ISBE led a team that gathered input from more than 300 educators, students, and administrators across the state to develop a Learning Renewal Resource Guide (Illinois P-20 Council, 2021). The purpose of the guide was to support local education agencies in identifying programming and approaches for educators and students to recover academically, socially, and emotionally from the pandemic. In 2021, leveraging federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, ISBE adopted a multicomponent approach to addressing learning and recovery from the pandemic, with the largest investment allocated for social and emotional learning (SEL) approaches (\$121 million). Their rationale for this investment was that learning recovery will be more effective for students if social-emotional well-being is addressed first.

In 2022, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) entered into a 3-year partnership with ISBE to generate evidence for the effects of its statewide investments in SEL on preK–12 students and school staff. Focused on a set of activities referred to as “learning renewal – social and emotional learning” (LR-SEL), AIR has committed to studying the implementation, outcomes, and costs of three core program areas: (a) SEL Hub activities, broadly defined as SEL-related professional development (PD) and supports offered through the hubs; (b) Resilience Education to Advance Community Healing (REACH), a trauma-responsive, school-based education approach; and (c) Community Partnership Grants intended to promote student, staff, and family well-being by connecting community-based organizations and mental health providers to schools. These three components of LR-SEL are described below.



SEL Hubs

Illinois's Regional Offices of Education (ROEs) and Intermediate Service Centers (ISCs) are the main vehicles for capacity building for districts and schools in the state. The ROEs and ISCs are aggregated into seven geographical areas with six areas covering between five and nine ROEs and ISCs. The city of Chicago is considered a separate seventh area. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and one of the ROEs in each of the areas is designated to serve as the SEL Hub for their area and provides support to the other ROEs and ISCs in that area. ISBE used \$17.5 million in ESSER funds to provide grants to one ROE in each of its seven hubs at the beginning of the 2021–22 school year so that CPS and each ROE could hire directors and staff to facilitate programming. The funding was the same for all seven hubs (\$2.5 million each across 3 years) regardless of the area's population. These hub directors and other staff have been tasked with building relationships with ROEs and districts specifically focused on promoting SEL, school mental health, and trauma-responsive educational approaches. SEL coaches encourage districts to prioritize this work, engage in training, and provide programming for schools.

Resilience Education to Advance Community Healing (REACH)

The Center for Childhood Resilience at Lurie Children's Hospital developed REACH, a school support model for trauma-responsive and healing-centered practices. REACH begins by inviting school staff to complete asynchronous webinars on (a) Trauma 101 with a COVID-19 lens; (b) race, equity, and trauma; (c) self-care; and (d) psychological first aid. Within each school participating in REACH, five individuals serve on a REACH team: (a) school administrator (principal or assistant principal), (b) student services/mental health lead (dean, counselor, social worker or psychologist or school's community mental health partner lead), (c) community-based organization lead, (d) teacher lead, and (e) parent mentor. After the initial training, each school's REACH team conducts a comprehensive needs assessment using the Trauma-Responsive Schools Implementation Assessment (TRS-IA). Based on the results of this activity, the team develops an action plan with progress monitoring. Finally, after schools have completed their needs assessments and developed their action plans (with coaching from the districts and the SEL Hub coach), REACH facilitators will help schools select one of the REACH communities of practice aligned to their action plan.

Community Partnership Grants

The largest component of ISBE's LR-SEL initiative is its investment in Community Partnership Grants. In September 2021, ISBE released a request for proposals inviting all public and private schools, districts, and similar educational entities to apply for a grant to develop comprehensive school systems grounded in mental health and trauma-responsive practices. The initial RFP stated that the grant would be for up to \$250,000 a year for two years, but ultimately all 136 entities that applied were awarded a total of \$635,000 each that can be expended across four school years (SY22, SY23, SY24, SY25). AIR has not yet been able to access Community Partnership Grant application data; these 136 grantees will be included in Year 2 implementation data collection efforts.

Research Design

The purpose of the implementation study is to describe how Illinois’s LR-SEL initiative is being implemented across the state. Our approach is rooted in implementation frameworks (Jackson et al., 2018; Lyon, 2018) that stress the importance of effective implementation and enabling contexts for evidence-based practices to lead to positive outcomes. The state gave regions discretion to implement a wide array of SEL-related programs, and little is known about the full scope of SEL-related activities being implemented across the state and the strategies or conditions facilitating implementation. Thus, the goal of our first year of data collection was to capture information broadly from SEL Hub, ROE, and ISC staff to understand the landscape of LR-SEL programming efforts across Illinois. Two overarching research questions (RQs) guide the implementation study:

RQ1 | What LR-SEL supports and services are being implemented across the state’s ROEs, districts, and schools?

RQ2 | What do state, district, and school staff identify as the facilitators and barriers to successful implementation of social and emotional supports for educators?

In subsequent years (Years 2 and 3) of the study, AIR will shift its focus to a more in-depth case study approach with high- and low-implementing districts and schools identified by SEL coaches working closely with LR-SEL efforts. This will provide information on how state-level efforts are being received by district and school staff and practiced in schools and classrooms.

Across all 3 years of the study, our primary approach for examining LR-SEL implementation involves interview research—a structured space in which the interviewer asks a study participant a targeted line of questions to understand how they make sense of a phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Interview research is well suited for understanding how state, district, and school staff make sense of the environmental, interorganizational, and interpersonal dynamics shaping the process and trajectory of LR-SEL program implementation (Maxwell, 2012). In Years 2 and 3 of the study, these interviews will form part of a nested, in-depth case study approach to understanding the coherence of LR-SEL program implementation and stakeholder perceptions of LR-SEL activities. Case studies allow researchers to study programs in a bounded and integrated context and to generate or challenge hypotheses about the program design or implementation (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Stake, 2010). Our goal through the case studies is to understand the facilitators of participation in PD opportunities, conditions and strategies facilitating school- and classroom-level implementation, stakeholders’ perceptions of the most helpful LR-SEL activities for student reengagement and educator and student well-being, and district and school leaders’ capacity to implement and sustain LR-SEL activities.

Across all years of the study, we plan to work with ISBE to disseminate interim findings with regional leaders and staff to provide formative feedback and improvements.

Data and Sample

During January to March 2023, the implementation team interviewed 40 individuals, including SEL Hub directors, ROE superintendents, Intermediate Service Center (ISC)¹ executive directors, SEL coaches, directors of professional learning, and other state program coordinators. We conducted outreach to all ROE superintendents and assistant superintendents across the state (some of whom referred us to SEL coaches and other regional leaders or staff closer to the LR-SEL efforts), but we did not get equal representation across regions. Notably, we received the most refusals from ROEs in Areas 1 and 4 (three refusals each). We also received one ROE refusal from each of Areas 2, 5, and 6, totaling nine ROE interview refusals in Year 1. Finally, we were unable to interview Community Partnership Grant leads during the first year of implementation due to limited Community Partnership Grant database accessibility, so our interview data are focused on experiences with implementing SEL Hub activities and REACH. Exhibit 1 displays the Year 1 participant sample by stakeholder role.

Exhibit 1. Year 1 Implementation Study Participant Sample

Stakeholder type	Number of participants
SEL Hub directors	6
ROE superintendents and assistant superintendents	11
ISC executive directors and assistant directors	3
SEL coaches, specialists, and trainers	11
Professional-learning directors, assistant directors, and coordinators	9
Total participants	40

Note. SEL = social and emotional learning; ROE = Regional Office of Education; ISC = Intermediate Service Center.

Participant Roles. We began each interview by asking participants to describe their roles, which we briefly describe in this section. Although ROE superintendents and ISC executive directors did not consistently describe their roles in our interviews, the role involves acting as an intermediary between the state board and local school districts. Regional superintendents and ISC executive directors are responsible for coordinating and delivering state and local services, ensuring state board compliance, providing leadership, and disseminating information for educators, school districts, and the community.²

Of the SEL coaches, specialists, and trainers interviewed, four individuals described their roles as developing and facilitating PD activities to be completed virtually, in person, or both. Other participants noted SEL coach tasks such as providing educational support to teachers and administrators, coordinating with other SEL coaches across the state, and delivering Youth Mental Health First Aid courses.

¹ Illinois has 35 ROEs and three ISCs (all of the ISCs are in Cook County).

² See [the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendent of Schools website](#) for specific role functions.

Overview of Agency Roles

SEL Hubs

As noted by the six SEL Hub directors, the role of each hub is to provide services, PD, and consulting for districts and schools, action planning sessions, and professional learning communities to help districts and schools use SEL resources effectively. Some hubs serve as fiscal agents and disburse LR-SEL funds to other ROEs in their service area, whereas others use the funds themselves. One participant explained that the hubs were “designed to really implement a comprehensive plan to address student safety, mental health, and well-being.” Each hub is led by a hub director and serves as the central warehouse of LR-SEL information for the hub’s ROEs, periodically convening ROEs to collaborate, discuss needs, and share resources. Participants noted that these hub meetings happened at different intervals, usually monthly or bimonthly. The hub directors and SEL coaches also meet periodically (again at varying intervals depending on the hub) to disseminate information about the supports and resources the hub can offer. According to three hub directors interviewed, the SEL Hub directors meet biweekly, often with ISBE representatives.

Each hub has the autonomy to approach the LR-SEL work differently. Some SEL Hubs prioritize the allocation of funds for REACH participation, whereas others leverage the ESSER funds to support the partial or full salaries of SEL coaches. In one area, the hub has allocated funds for each ROE to use in any way they see fit (e.g., scheduling SEL-related workshops or book clubs) to address the needs communicated by districts or schools. In all cases, LR-SEL supports and resources are provided to schools and districts at no cost.

The structure of the hubs also varies across areas. For example, one hub has an SEL director who oversees six ROEs in their hub, including supervising and training each ROE’s coach. In other hubs, coaches are assigned to schools, charged with communicating the resources available to those schools, and following up based on school-identified needs.

Each hub is responsible for tracking participation in their SEL offerings. For each SEL Hub, ISBE has set targets for the number of schools to be recruited for participation in the REACH initiative, but participants were not aware whether these recruitment targets were being enforced. In most cases, participants explained that ROEs tracked participation in LR-SEL-related professional learning events or activities that is then reported to the hubs and aggregated across



ROEs in a hub-level tracker. The targets are aligned with expectations from ISBE that a target of 50% of districts in each hub area will have had access to SEL Hub coaching or training during the first 2 years of the grant (through SY 2022–23).

ROEs and ISCs

The ROE superintendents in Illinois are elected officials who serve as a conduit between their districts, schools, and ISBE. The ROEs are responsible for three main functions: state compliance, professional learning, and truancy work. One ROE leader shared that the ROEs uphold compliance with state board decisions, but they also regularly check in with schools and districts about their needs and connect them with available resources. Another ROE leader noted that the latter role gives the ROEs more political capital with schools and districts than the state board. In general, ROE staff described the agency’s role as bringing awareness of resources and supports to districts and schools and building strong relationships with district and school staff. One ROE staff shared that “we are the glue that holds together these schools in our area,” whereas another described ROEs as “boots-on-the-ground support.”

Similar to the SEL Hubs, there appeared to be different structures across the ROEs; however, several ROE staff described an SEL coach or ROE coach as the main communicator to districts and schools about the supports available through the SEL Hub. Some ROEs use the ESSER funds to pay for an SEL specialist, whereas other ROEs split the pay between an SEL specialist and a part-time SEL coach. One ROE used ESSER funds to create a dedicated SEL staff position, and two others used them to fund SEL specialist and SEL coach positions. A hub director explained that her ROEs took different approaches to the work: One might have decided to hire a coach specifically for LR-SEL, whereas another might have their full-time PD director assume the role of coach as part of their other responsibilities. She shared some of the advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches:

We do see some difference in outcomes based on which model they chose, so I think that is a variable that impacts the outcomes a little bit. So whether it’s this person is the SEL Hub coach and that’s really their only responsibility, or this person is the Director of Professional Development and as part of that they’re going to serve as the SEL Hub coach. One of the pros of having someone who’s the Director of Professional Development is that person is well known by the schools. So as far as that workshop part, I think they’ve got that kind of street cred. But as far as supporting schools through a REACH process, that’s a lot harder if you’re doing this among a myriad of other things in your job description. Whereas if you are just a coach, I think you’re probably giving more support directly to that school.

Serving a similar role as the ROEs, the ISCs are intermediary state agencies in Cook County that are responsible for supporting districts. As described by one ISC participant, ISC coaches work directly with the school-based teams completing the TRS-IA needs assessment, analyzing those data, developing an action plan, and embedding themselves into the PD schedule of that district based on the eight TRS-IA domains.³

³ TRS-IA domains include whole-school safety planning, prevention and early intervention, trauma programming, whole-school prevention planning, targeted trauma-informed programming, whole-school trauma programming, staff self-care, classroom strategies, and family and community engagement.

Collaboration Across Agencies

When asking participants to reflect on their roles and interactions with other regional leaders and staff, a theme surfaced about the level of collaboration in which staff are now engaging. One emergent theme from our first year of interviews was how the learning renewal funding increased collaboration through regular meetings, networking opportunities, and cross-region communication about SEL professional learning opportunities and resources. Eight participants cited this increased collaboration as an outcome of the grant and described different ways that they now communicate or coordinate resources with other agencies. For example, one participant shared that the SEL coach in their ROE networks with other coaches across ROEs to secure support for PD opportunities. Another participant described how their hub facilitated more cross-regional collaboration through its meetings:

The hub actually had us participate in a poverty simulation they were leading. And so we went and did it and we worked it and I thought, “This is awesome. I want to bring it to our county.” Well, it’s \$3,000 for that kit. And so I was going to get trained, which was \$300, but then we couldn’t afford a kit. Well, ROE [X] offered us their kit to share, and she came down and did the work. We paid her with some of our budget, but she did come down. They brought a team of 10 people. And it was awesome because it was really like I got mentored to provide a pretty elaborate training. And well, I got to know their people, they got to know mine. Now they’re going to be doing their summer institute in June; I’m hoping to go present for them.

This participant believed that the regular monthly meetings held by their hub helped them learn from others’ expertise and experience. She noted that this was particularly helpful for newly hired staff who had a “steep learning curve” entering the SEL work and processing information about all the different ROE procedures. From her perspective, these monthly meetings helped build capacity so that no one had to create everything themselves and coaches could receive feedback on their ideas. Similarly, another participant shared that “each ROE tends to have a niche that I would call them about,” which has helped build her own capacity.

One SEL Hub director described how she has seen relationships grow, with ROE staff messaging each other outside of formal meeting times and sharing resources and tips on what has worked well. This differed from her experience with previous models of PD, where 1 day of training might be offered with limited or no follow-up support. She explained that under the grant, ROEs have been trying out different professional-learning events, activities, and trainings and then debriefing SEL Hub directors about how they went. She summarized this change of pace by stating, “In education, we’re so busy trying to get to the next thing. . . . We’ve been able to really slow it down and go deeper to build the capacity with each other.”

Some participants provided examples of how they take the information they learned back to their region’s schools. One SEL coach said that she meets with more than 25 schools monthly to discuss PD offerings that can help them reach the goals in their action plans. Another participant stated that some ROEs in her area held several informational sessions with building administrators or other district/school personnel to disseminate hub information, TRS-IA, or PD opportunities.

“Sometimes it feels like it’s every other day that they’re collaborating, which is something that I didn’t expect. That’s a very positive thing of this learning renewal; how it’s brought agencies across the state together really.”

– SEL Hub Director

Scope of LR-SEL Activities

As noted in our Data and Sample section, we were not able to interview Community Partnership grantees during our first year of data collection. The SEL and ROE leaders and staff whom we interviewed did not have insight into how these partnerships were being implemented; therefore, we asked participants to describe the scope of REACH and SEL Hub activities they were implementing. Overall, participants shared examples of REACH activities and high-level examples of SEL Hub activities; however, most were not able to share details about what each of the referenced SEL Hub activities entailed. To examine the scope of these activities in a more systematic way, we analyzed the participation trackers from SEL Hub Areas 1 to 6 and have included high-level classifications of the most offered activities in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2. Sample Activities Related to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Hubs and Resilience Education to Advance Community Healing (REACH)

SEL Hub activities	REACH activities
School climate and safety (e.g., crisis prevention, classroom culture)	TRS-IA implementation
Educator well-being (e.g., yoga, Mindful Mondays)	Action plan development
Trauma-related professional development (e.g., trauma-informed teaching trainings, impact of trauma on brain and body)	REACH online modules
SEL fundamentals (e.g., SEL for All series)	Trainings on restorative practices
Youth development (e.g., Power of Positivity, teen leadership)	Trainings on “brain architecture” and mental health
SEL for school leaders/administrators	REACH community of practice
Youth mental health (e.g., Youth Mental Health First Aid, Anxiety in the Classroom)	Ad hoc training responsive to individual needs
Coaching and action planning	REACH coaching

Note. TRS-IA = Trauma-Responsive Schools Implementation Assessment.

REACH Activities

Interviewees noted that their respective districts and schools were at different phases of REACH implementation, from signing the initial agreement to completing the TRS-IA and implementing the action plan they developed in Year 1. Of the schools implementing REACH, participants referenced TRS-IA assessment, action plan development, online modules, trainings on restorative practices, trainings on brain architecture and mental health, communities of

practice, and ad hoc training responsive to individual needs. Two participants described the process of supporting districts with REACH onboarding and professional learning. One of the coaches shared the following:

We onboard cohorts of districts for action planning on using the TRS-IA or REACH's platform. In house, we do that to deconstruct the TRS-IA, the resources, everything we can offer them. We've made a huge list of PDs that we've made a schedule for based on the last couple of years. And we hire those people out that can do PDs. We come back with another session on school improvement planning and action planning. We assign coaches to their buildings to say they'll contact you about upcoming events or when you do your action plan, send it to us. We'll look at it, and say what can we support you with. And then I even personally or other coaches go out and do PDs for them relative to the SEL Hub or action plans going on.

SEL Hub Activities

Although support for REACH implementation appeared to be more similarly structured across ROEs, participants referenced an array of SEL professional learning activities, events, and trainings that districts and schools have engaged in through the SEL Hubs. As shown in Exhibit 2, these activities included SEL professional learning opportunities that predated ESSER funding, trainings by Dr. Bruce Perry, book studies, restorative practices workshops, SEL-related PD events, trauma-informed trainings, and family engagement workshops.

Two participants shared that they were creating book studies for their schools. One coach highlighted the flexibility of their book studies, which allow the audience to “choose which book studies [they] do” at their own convenience either online or in person. The other coach described putting together virtual “in-depth” book studies to enable educator attendance that involved reading the book, participating in an online component, and attending a small number of Zoom meetings to discuss what they had learned.

Additionally, another two participants described attending more intensive trainings by Dr. Bruce Perry, who developed the neurosequential model approach to problem-solving. Dr. Perry's trainings explore the impact of trauma on the developing brain, an issue relevant to educators and other school staff supporting students through the pandemic. As one of the coaches said,

We do a lot of work under the [neuro]sequential model of education with Dr. Bruce Perry, an amazing human that, because of the hub funding, I was able to go through their nine-month training. So now I can provide this information to schools. And it is the basis of all of our work in our hub. And so yeah, we really talk about regulation, relationship that will help children get and educators be in their thinking brain. And so those are [a] common language, we say. We focus much more on social emotional learning supports. And so those are some words we use a lot.

Finally, one participant described how their ROE is attempting to “redefine what family engagement looks like,” which involves thinking of additional ways to include families in school affairs. For example, they are supporting school districts in facilitating family-based activities within school grounds and neighboring locations such as community parks and event centers.

District and School Interest

To understand which LR-SEL activities were most appealing to districts and schools, we asked ROE and SEL Hub staff to share their perceptions of district and school interests based on their own interactions with these individuals. Twenty-seven participants responded, and the following topics were the most cited:

1. Classroom management
2. Understanding how SEL and trauma affect student behavior and school environments
3. Educator well-being (to support student well-being)
4. Trauma-informed practices and strategies
5. Restorative practices to repair relationships
6. Student, family, and community engagement
7. Understanding of student mental health issues, resources, and neuroscience/brain development

Eight of the 27 ROE respondents reported that districts and schools were most often interested in **classroom management strategies**. Participants believed that interest in this area was driven by educators' needs to understand and change students' behavior. However, participants did not explicitly link the interest in behavior management to interest in SEL in most cases. Instead, participants explained the interest in classroom management strategies as a response to student needs emerging from the COVID context and the realization that previous strategies they were using no longer work. As one participant shared,

They don't want to talk about math. They don't want to talk about reading. But they want to talk about how to arrange the classroom. Even when kids started to come back, remember everybody had to be six feet apart? Then we're putting up plexiglass. So how do you manage a classroom under these new circumstances?

Another participant noted the pattern of teachers who adjusted during school closures and remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic now returning to prior expectations and practices that do not work in the current climate:

While some of that is getting blamed on kids, some of it is just teachers are burnt out, and they're doing the same stuff and kids are no longer, it's just not, they don't do it. And understandably, they got to do remote and they saw that they didn't have to be in chairs every day, all day long, listening to boring lectures. And while some teachers in an effort to be responsive during COVID did a great job, . . . some teachers were right back to doing everything the way they've always done it . . . I think what they want are classroom strategies. What they think they want is, "How do I control these kids?" What I hope they'll start seeing is you need to change practice because the gig is different and you can't blame and put all the responsibility on children who don't have the control mechanisms to change these systems that are not working anymore. Or are working exactly as they were intended to work if we're going to continue to marginalize and exclude people.

However, although some participants described classroom management strategies absent an SEL lens, another eight participants identified **understanding how SEL and trauma show up in school**. With this topic, participants noted that school and district interest stemmed from a new awareness of how SEL and trauma-informed approaches

could help them understand student behavior in the wake of the pandemic. Describing what a coach in their region shared, one participant provided the following anecdote:

Teachers are like, “I don’t know what to do when a kid in the third row gets up and walks out. That never happened before.” It’s a little bit of an extreme, but those kinds of activities where kids who’d been away for a couple years, they came back, and teachers may have taught for 10 years, but they were experiencing things they’d never seen, like emotional reactions to things, or literally kids walking out, or more fights in the hallways. There were just things that felt inexplicable until you could see them through a trauma-informed lens.

Interview participants also connected districts’ and schools’ interest in how SEL and trauma show up in schools to emerging needs from the pandemic. In contrast to descriptions about the interest in classroom management, participants made an explicit connection between behavior, trauma, and SEL supports. As one participant said,

The influx of students that are not being supported with their trauma or mental health issues and staff seem to be now at the forefront. Their brain and their learning and maybe it’s not a choice. Maybe people are actually struggling with anxiety, et cetera.

In general, participants believed that the increased awareness of these issues across their communities created a sense of responsibility among school staff.

Next, seven participants found that there was interest in **teacher and staff wellness and self-regulation**. These participants felt that social-emotional well-being was an important part of teachers’ ability to self-regulate in a healthy way so that they could support their students’ ability to regulate their own emotions and behavior. As one participant shared,

The number one area that I have across all of my schools right now is employee wellness. . . . I think that it’s about understanding secondary traumatic stress, understanding compassion fatigue, understanding why I feel like junk every night when I go home after work, and I don’t enjoy my job anymore, and then knowing how to take the next step to make myself feel better.

Additionally, seven participants claimed that districts and schools were interested in trauma-informed and trauma-responsive practices, strategies, and teaching; six participants had received requests for and interest in PD on restorative practices in classrooms to repair relationships with students; five participants noted district and school interest in student, family, and community engagement; four participants identified school and district interest in student mental health issues and, in particular, neuroscience/child brain development; and two participants stated that districts and schools were interested in understanding truancy and absenteeism through an SEL/trauma lens.

Five participants identified LR-SEL PD topics that were less appealing to districts and schools, such as systemic changes in SEL programming and topics that have had greater coverage to date (e.g., SEL foundations and training on Adverse Childhood Experiences [ACEs]) were among these topics. For example, two participants noted that districts are looking for immediate supports or solutions to problems rather than long-term, systemic ways of incorporating SEL and trauma-related supports into schools.

Prioritization of LR-SEL Activities

In addition to asking about school and district interests, we asked regional leaders and SEL coaches to share their perspectives on how districts and schools in their region are determining LR-SEL priorities. We also asked whether each hub or ROE influenced the prioritization of LR-SEL activities in each area.

School and District Prioritization

Of 14 participants who described prioritization of LR-SEL activities, eight said that most ROEs use non-TRS-IA needs assessment tools to identify school needs and determine LR-SEL priorities. These alternative approaches include using Google forms or other online forms to administer surveys to district and school staff, regularly communicating with district and school staff through trainings or during the process of planning trainings, assessing needs during regularly scheduled meetings (e.g., curriculum meetings), or informally conversing with school staff. One participant noted that the CASEL needs assessment is used in several districts as a gauge of what should be prioritized and implemented in schools. These touch points allowed district and school staff to communicate their needs to ROE or SEL Hub staff, which informs the types of supports and resources the ROEs then provide to district and school staff.

In addition to these processes for assessing needs in districts and schools, six participants also shared that several of their districts use the TRS-IA, particularly in regions that are widely implementing REACH. The TRS-IA is a formal part of the REACH process and a precursor to support action planning. In some regions, staff described use of the TRS-IA as limited to REACH, and in other cases, they described using it more broadly to assess school and district needs. The eight domains were designed to help identify areas in which schools are implementing trauma-responsive programming well and where it has been more challenging to do so. Although respondents mentioned the TRS-IA and other needs assessments, they explained that there was no uniform process through which districts and schools should be identifying their own priorities. The LR-SEL activities, events, trainings, and other professional learning opportunities were either shared or developed based on schools' stated needs.

SEL Hub and ROE-Driven Prioritization

There were also regional variations in which LR-SEL activities were prioritized. For example, two regions have explicitly prioritized REACH. As an ROE staff member shared in one region,

I think REACH has really been prioritized in our whole area. As I said, our hub [has] been extremely active and supportive in bringing people into that initiative. There was a good match between the needs of our districts and what that initiative was offering. So, I think that was part of the reason that that was very much prioritized for our schools.

Another participant mentioned,

if there's a school that's really just hungry and at that starting point, we would probably prioritize REACH because it's going to give them so many other things. Then once they get going on their action plan, they can still [tap] into these other SEL Hub supports.

Two SEL Hubs gave REACH and other LR-SEL supports equal priority. For example, these hubs used the TRS-IA and/or REACH action plan to inform the PD they provided. They pointed out the following:

We have specialists that are really focused on REACH and then the coaches that are really focused on the implementation piece and on the PD and coaching and SEL. It was really to not put all that on one person. I would say that I kind of put equal prioritization on both of those because those were both goals that we had to fulfill: REACH and the PD.

Two respondents shared that some ROEs made region-specific choices about the type of PD to deliver and the delivery mechanism. For example, one ROE staff member said that they did not provide virtual PD or professional learning sessions but instead prioritized longer in-person sessions they viewed as more impactful in their region. Another interview participant staff member noted that they shaped their PD plan for the region around interests that districts and schools shared with them. As they explained,

There's that needs basis because I can't spend all the funds on a generality because we'll run out of funds too quick. So it's got to be a district says, I need CHAMPS. And then I find the rest of the districts that are interested, and we start working through the process of coordinating that for them and then for everybody else that might be interested.



District and School Motivation

To build a better sense of how and why schools and districts participate in LR-SEL activities, we asked participants what the factors they believed were the most motivating for district and school staff.

Most participants noted that staff and students were experiencing more burnout and frustration than ever before, which motivated school and district participation in LR-SEL activities. Seven of 18 respondents commented that educators and administrators were feeling overwhelmed by the pandemic. They noted that staff were attempting to cope with their own traumas related to the pandemic but are also navigating the traumas of their students. One participant believed that this contributed to educators “[experiencing] second-hand trauma from dealing with the students, and many are leaving the profession.” Additionally, participants mentioned that school staff did not feel equipped to handle the needs of students. Six noted a variety of student mental health issues related to the pandemic, including anxiety and stress, discipline issues, and learning loss.

Relatedly, four participants claimed that districts and schools were seeing increased value in SEL resources. A few participants mentioned that the pandemic underscored the need to bolster mental health, both to alleviate school staff burnout and address problematic student behaviors. One coach emphasized that district and school staff were now beginning to see the link between academic success and emotional well-being:

I mean, it’s not even a philosophical belief. It’s a right-here-in-my-face belief for both administrators and the mental health professionals in schools. They’re wanting the help. They know they need the help because I think their jobs have just been inundated with helping teachers navigate the social emotional needs of their classrooms, of themselves, of their parents. It moved from what felt right to this is right. I mean . . . we have to address it.

Some districts have also been more vocal about asserting their needs, which helped one ROE participant find them appropriate PD opportunities. This participant also said that some districts hosted “meetings where people are singing the praises of the [SEL] training”—positive feedback that has helped reinforce the importance of SEL.



Participation in LR-SEL Activities, Events, and Trainings

To understand the extent of school and district participation in LR-SEL activities, events, trainings, and other supports, we first asked ROE and SEL Hub staff about participation targets and whether they were met or exceeded. **In our conversations, we found a lack of clarity around who sets LR-SEL participation targets; some participants claimed it was ISBE, others believed it was the hubs, a couple others stated that it was their ROE, and a small number reported having no target.** Notably, ISBE has a grant participation target of 50% of schools in each region accessing SEL/trauma training from the SEL Hubs. Of the participants who could describe a target, participants from eight ROEs described reaching or surpassing it, and participants from six ROEs described not meeting their targets.

The management of SEL-related activities involved diverse tracking approaches. Although many ROEs relied on the REACH tracker for monitoring progress, some employed the ISBE framework to analyze activities. In addition to these tools, ROEs were using internal tracking systems, such a standardized schedule for submitting implementation progress reports. However, respondents reported that many ROEs still provided these reports at intervals ranging from daily submissions to a few weeks, contingent on the specific activity being tracked.

Participation Descriptions

We also asked ROE and SEL Hub staff to share their observations of who was attending LR-SEL opportunities and the extent of their engagement. A total of 21 participants responded to this question. It proved difficult for many participants to answer because they were uncertain about how to characterize the extent of participation. **The lack of clarity and consistency about what constituted participation and how it was measured are key takeaways from our interviews,** as they highlighted areas in which LR-SEL programming could benefit from more standardization despite the decentralized nature of implementation.

Eleven ROE and SEL Hub staff members described district and school participation quantitatively. That is, interview participants described the number or percentage of districts and schools participating in SEL activities, events, and trainings. However, most participants did not have this information readily available. Of those who did, their comments could not be interpreted consistently. For example, staff did not always differentiate participation between REACH, SEL PD, Community Partnership Grants, or preexisting PD offered through the ROE. AIR reviewed participation trackers for each of the six SEL Hubs to get a better sense of participation; however, the trackers lacked information about the expected number of participants from each school or district, the types of participants expected (e.g., counselor, educator), and school-specific details about size or capacity. The latter may have skewed participation data so that higher capacity districts and schools who could send more staff to LR-SEL events appeared to participate at higher rates than lower-capacity districts and schools that might send only one person.

In addition, 11 respondents described the variation in what constituted participation across regions. Some described participation as including a single attendee from a school (e.g., a coach), whereas others described school attendance as sending multiple staff to a PD session.

Since there were no requirements for schools or districts to attend a certain number of LR-SEL-related opportunities, participants generally described whether they perceived participation to be going well. For one interviewee, the participation of two to three districts in hub activities was considered a high level. Another

respondent said that high participation in SEL Hub activities meant schools were accessing SEL Hub resources or calling to receive individualized support.

Barriers to Participation

Of the 21 interview respondents who described barriers, most identified a lack of capacity as the reason that districts and schools did not participate in LR-SEL activities, events, and trainings. Thirteen participants stated that districts and schools were unable to attend SEL PD or REACH activities because of a lack of substitutes to cover school staff. As one ROE staff person noted, sufficient funding for staff and substitutes posed a barrier:

Funds, staffing is a huge one . . . We're not getting many teachers to participate. That's a huge struggle because they can't leave the building, and they do not want to spend time after. And that is from the mouths of teachers and that's from the mouths of the administration central office. . . . We look at the data here, [and] we don't see teachers are able to leave the classrooms.

Eight participants explained the staffing shortage as extending beyond substitutes; some schools experienced teacher shortages and had paraprofessionals teaching classes in addition to their normal responsibilities. Some interviewees cited paraprofessional burnout as a barrier given that paraprofessionals were often asked to take over multiple school roles during staffing shortages. This was perceived as particularly challenging in rural districts with fewer resources to draw on. Further, one participant noted that at some of her region's schools, the principal was acting as a substitute for teachers' classes and the "ability for people to get out of their building is almost impossible."

Relatedly, eight interview participants said that another common barrier was that many districts and schools were too busy to participate. The teacher and substitute shortage exacerbated the workloads of school staff, who were already implementing other initiatives that began prior to LR-SEL. Several participants described school staff as fatigued or overwhelmed, with a couple participants attributing the fatigue to a lack of integration across initiatives. For example, in one ROE, a participant stated that another existing SEL program, called Resilient Southern Illinois, discouraged some districts and schools participating in the program from engaging with their ROEs or SEL Hub about other LR-SEL opportunities.

One ROE staff member pointed to the danger of initiative fatigue, stating,

The biggest barrier . . . is just initiative fatigue and just so much going on in schools . . . That's why I said I'm even checking on these schools, because many of them start and then something happens that it's hard . . . It's hard for a school right now to commit to a process, stick with it, really give it their full attention. Our typical cycles of school improvement that we used to use are just not as feasible anymore because there's so much coming at schools, this year more than last year.

A couple participants shared that integration of LR-SEL components that built off preexisting initiatives had the potential to promote greater interest and participation.

Another participant described how staff shortages and initiative fatigue influenced REACH implementation in some of her districts. She noted that some schools were still struggling to recruit staff for the school-based REACH teams because of teachers' heavy workloads.

Finally, three interview participants described capacity challenges at the ROE level that created barriers to participation for districts and schools. As one coach explained,

It'd be great if more schools wanted to go through this process, but at the same time, I'm not quite sure how. . . . With what the schools that are going through it, plus all the other things I'm doing to coordinate just general professional learning opportunities, and attend my own trainings, I'm not quite sure when I would manage that. So as much as I would love to have more schools going through this, I'm not sure what my capacity is for that.

Similarly, another participant from a large ROE stated that it would take significantly more time for ROE staff to work with schools and get them interested in participating in LR-SEL opportunities because of geographic spread and the different paces at which schools are onboarded to REACH.

In addition to lack of capacity, **six participants described how district and school administrators' beliefs and knowledge about SEL, trauma, and COVID were barriers to participation.** Two participants shared that district and school staff did not always see the need for or value of SEL. One participant mentioned that some districts and schools were handling SEL in a superficial way, introducing it only briefly and not integrating it into school practices. Another participant similarly explained that some administrators and educators did not see the need. For example, some of the high socioeconomic status schools did not necessarily see the need for SEL, but lower income schools had been more open to what the state could offer. Two respondents stated that beliefs about trauma and COVID were barriers to participation. Specifically, they felt that leaders at districts and schools in their region were turned off by the word "trauma," or felt that "COVID's over," thereby reducing their likelihood of participating in the LR-SEL activities. Likewise, one participant identified lack of training and knowledge in trauma-informed practices among administrators as a barrier. Finally, three participants described lack of knowledge or clarity, including uncertainty or skepticism, about the program itself as a barrier to district and school participation.

Facilitators of Participation

In our interviews, we also learned from ROE and SEL Hub staff what strategies helped facilitate participation for districts and schools. Three participants described logistical facilitators of participation, such as using school improvement days or institute days for professional learning events and offering virtual options. One strategy that improved the odds of attendance was ensuring alternative delivery mechanisms for the professional learning:

The only thing that really hinders us is the lack of substitute teachers right now; for teachers to be able to get out of their classrooms to come to any type of training. But we've tried to be creative in how we've offered some of these things, where some of it's been through Zoom, some of it's been where we can come to your school, or you don't necessarily have to come to us, we can come to you. So I think that that's been supportive.

Finally, three participants shared that another facilitator of participation was districts and schools recognizing their own needs and proactively asking the ROE for help.



Implementation Progress

We asked participants to characterize how much implementation progress districts and schools have made to date on REACH and SEL Hub activities; however, we quickly learned that this question was difficult to answer, as nearly all requests for SEL supports and services were school driven and varied greatly. Further, some areas were more heavily focused on REACH, whereas others spent more of their time on coaching schools, providing PD, and supporting SEL and trauma responsiveness in other ways. SEL Hub and ROE staff were not able to measure implementation progress against a particular set of criteria. Instead, they shared their perceptions of the successes and challenges to date across schools.

REACH

A few interviewees reported positive REACH recruitment efforts. One participant described progress in recruitment. They credited progress to good networking and communication, including the Hub assistant director conducting an informational meeting for seven schools and the option of a virtual meeting for two additional schools. One SEL Hub director described a positive implementation process and specifically credited this success in large part to their in-person recruitment strategy and relationships with school districts. They expressed that some areas had difficulty recruiting because schools thought the program was a lot of work, whereas their approach was to ease the process: “And really our implementation is this is about making their lives easier, not making them more difficult. Trying to support SEL work should not be causing more stress for their administrative team or their team that they put together.”

Another interviewee explained that the level of REACH implementation varied significantly because of regional differences. Depending on the ROE or ISC, there could be a notable difference in the level of REACH engagement and school interest, which affects coaches’ focus. Some ROEs heavily prioritized REACH support, whereas others allocated more coaching time to areas such as PD, SEL, and trauma responsiveness. The variations seemed linked to factors such as district resources, with larger districts possessing SEL departments and directors that encouraged participation in REACH. Specifically, as this interviewee shared,

In some ROEs, the coaches are spending most of their time supporting schools in REACH, whereas in other ROEs [and] ISCs, those coaches are spending most of their time coaching schools, providing [PD], supporting SEL and trauma responsiveness in other ways besides REACH. I do feel like in some areas we have larger districts that have more resources. They have SEL departments, they have SEL directors, so they’re not as reliant on the ROEs for that support as other places.

Many participants also described specific challenges to REACH implementation and a few expressed some level of success in recruitment and retention of their initial cohort. One interviewee noted their perception of what inhibited some schools from making progress, describing the lack of clarity on REACH timelines and requirements as well as a need to tailor approaches based on school individuality. She stated,

Obviously, this whole process was not set up very well and timelines and requirements, so some places took longer than others. . . . But I mean everybody, all schools are different. There’s too many schools that need different levels of support.

An ROE leader explained that not every school is ready for REACH. They noted that some schools may require additional support just to get started and may need more flexibility than what is offered in the REACH participation agreement.

SEL Hub Activities

Participants from three ROEs shared that they were further along with implementing PD opportunities compared with other LR-SEL opportunities. In some cases, this was due to preexisting PD activities offered through the ROE. In others, participants said that it was more accessible for some schools and districts to participate in these PD opportunities than in a more structured program such as REACH.

As described for the REACH efforts above, participants shared that a proactive approach—including an investment in building connections with schools and local agencies—helped facilitate progress on implementing other SEL Hub activities. A staff member from an ROE credited a cooperative approach to the successful planning and implementation of both large- and small-scale PD events. This respondent said, “Since I’ve taken the role, I’ve pushed a little harder, a little further to get closer to the schools and get them into a definitive program.”

Logic Models Guiding Implementation

We asked participants whether and to what extent ROEs and SEL Hubs used logic models to guide the LR-SEL programs being offered. Eight interviewees acknowledged an established logic model to help support the implementation of LR-SEL activities in their ROEs; however, the definitions and applications of each logic model varied widely. Two of these participants mentioned that they used logic models only for their Community Partnership Grants, whereas others discussed REACH logic models as being closer to checklists used during outreach to explain programming opportunities, outline roles and responsibilities, or outline the onboarding process. One of these individuals shared that their logic model identified activities, outputs, outcomes, impact, external factors, and assumptions. Finally, two participants discussed using a theory of action from CASEL or general guidance from REACH and SEL Hubs, but not a specific logic model.



Local Conditions Facilitating Implementation

The study team asked participants to reflect on the local conditions that have either supported or undermined the implementation of LR-SEL programming in their regions to date.

Conditions Supporting Implementation

District leadership support has been critical for ensuring successful implementation. Four ROE and SEL Hub staff members shared perceptions that superintendent buy-in influenced how schools participated by informing districtwide priorities and the allocation of resources. As one coach described,

When I was coaching districts, if the superintendent would not sign the [memorandum of understanding] and meet with me, I didn't coach that district. I would just say, "Well, thank you. It sounds like to me you have other issues to deal with. Maybe another time," but I know that the superintendent is critical to this process. If the superintendent's goal is "we are going to implement social and emotional learning districtwide," [he/she] is going to see that you have the resources and the [PD] to do that. They control the resources.

Most participants who cited district leadership as a critical condition shared positive experiences with superintendent buy-in. In one incident, a participant explained that in one of the districts she coaches, they would not have been able to continue SEL programming if it were not for strong superintendent leadership. This interviewee explained that a district faced backlash from parents who associated SEL with critical race theory (CRT), and without superintendent buy-in and prioritization, SEL programming likely would have ended.

A couple other participants shared specific examples of conditions that supported implementation. One interviewee stated that having an SEL implementation rubric was helpful for illuminating where schools needed more help and how to receive it. Another interviewee said that the universal need for SEL programming during pandemic recovery, as well as the free resources, made the LR-SEL programming easy to buy into and implement. He noted, "I think that every place was looking for some help. I think everybody was hungry. . . . I did not hear anybody say, 'No, we're not doing this.'" He explained that regional and political differences may have affected how information was communicated and how LR-SEL resources were delivered, but it was well received across regions.

Conditions Undermining Implementation

Parents and community members have misconceptions of SEL. Conflating SEL with CRT was a common issue that undermined implementation of LR-SEL. Eight interviewees said that some parents and community members placed SEL in the same politically charged category as CRT, with one participant claiming that "they've gotten in their minds that these are liberal agendas." A couple participants noted that the association with the Lurie Children's Hospital (for REACH) also drove misconceptions that LR-SEL programming was related to sex education and gender-affirming care. Although this sentiment was commonly reported by SEL Hub and ROE staff, participants noted that community members' resistance to SEL for these reasons was rooted in fear rather than experience.

Similarly, some participants noted that the language used as part of LR-SEL programming sometimes posed a challenge to implementation. For example, the word "trauma" was cited by three different participants as a barrier

to buy-in because either school leaders or community members did not believe in the concept of trauma or found it to be an overly dramatic characterization of COVID experiences.

For example, one interviewee mentioned that the word “trauma” was a turnoff to participation in action planning, stating,

I’ve been trying to get them to do the TRS-IA to understand [that] this is a framework that allows you to at least have a strategic plan. I will say, I think people are turned off by the word “trauma.” So when it’s like, “trauma, trauma, trauma,” they’re like, “get over it.”

Individual participants also cited initiative fatigue, particularly with REACH because of its multiple requirements, and leadership transitions that disrupted the continuity of SEL efforts.

SEL Hub and ROE Strategies Facilitating Implementation

The study team asked participants to reflect on specific strategies that SEL Hubs or ROEs used to facilitate the implementation of LR-SEL programming in their regions.

Increased cross-agency collaboration has facilitated implementation. Overall, the most effective and commonly cited strategy facilitating implementation was cross-agency collaboration across ROEs and SEL Hubs. Many interviewees shared that prior to LR-SEL programming, there was minimal coordination across ROEs; however, several have collaborated both within and across SEL Hubs through formal LR-SEL events and informal resource-sharing channels. This has supported stronger relationships and communication, which has also helped ROEs identify schools that might benefit from particular LR-SEL resources. One participant described it as “having good communication, having something where if we don’t know it, we’re going to find the person that does and we’re going to help them out.” Two ROE staff shared that they met with other ROE representatives once a month to learn about the work others were doing and share content knowledge expertise, as well as expertise on how to leverage different funding pools.

Hub structure and regular meetings facilitated smoother implementation. A few participants shared that having one point person from the hub (e.g., the lead) to ask questions was helpful for pooling resources and strategizing how to implement LR-SEL activities. Further, one hub director reported that she met weekly with other SEL Hub directors to collaborate, share resources and ideas, and collectively solve problems. Another hub director stated that the monthly ROE superintendent meetings were helpful for understanding the leadership vision they had for their districts and how best to communicate LR-SEL information to principals, teachers, social workers, and counselors. In addition, some ROEs leveraged preexisting collaboration structures, such as a “Speaker’s Bureau,” to pool resources as a group and disburse the costs among ROEs.

Finally, one coach claimed that the combined PD trainings put together by their hub—both synchronous and asynchronous—were an effective means for cross-ROE collaboration:

As an SEL Hub network across the state, we collaborate and communicate a lot. I feel like the communication between ROEs and hubs for the SEL coaches is great, [whether] we’ve met in person, or when we meet on Zoom, or just email. I mean, I’m frequently getting emails from other ROEs telling me about different things they’re doing that are open to anybody.

In the Area 1 SEL Hub, a participant claimed that the hub did a “phenomenal job” at creating regular areawide events where all ROE coaches and staff could benefit from the expertise of a guest speaker and share that knowledge and support with their districts.

Strong ROE relationships with schools/districts facilitated successful on-the-ground implementation. Another strategy facilitating successful implementation was building and maintaining strong relationships with schools and districts. As the conduits between SEL Hubs and districts and schools, ROE staff shared that building personal relationships with school and district leaders made it easier to have conversations about new SEL resources. Similarly, an ROE superintendent said that her position was “all about relationships,” which entailed building relationships throughout the community and building trust with different district personnel, not just leadership.

Participants report that using the TRS-IA and other initial needs assessment tools has been helpful for identifying school needs and facilitating school-driven implementation. Four participants shared that using needs assessments—the TRS-IA or others—has been helpful for identifying potential resources they can leverage to share with schools. These needs assessments have informed conversations with other ROEs and SEL Hub directors to help match resources and activities with schools.

Finally, participants also cited other successful strategies, such as external support for SEL coaches, ROE access to asynchronous structures (e.g., online platforms to host virtual events), and hub flexibility in how to communicate and deliver LR-SEL programming.



Promising Activities

Interviewees reflected on the LR-SEL activities they found most promising for reengaging students and meeting the social, emotional, and mental health needs of educators and students. Six of nineteen respondents said that activities focused on providing teachers with the knowledge and strategies needed to assist students with their mental health were most promising, whereas three respondents felt that activities directly focusing on student mental health, teacher trauma-informed care, and restorative practices were most promising. Other participants shared that opportunities for collaborative discussion about student mental health and activities prioritizing staff self-care were promising.

Perceived Benefits of Activities

Participants shared what they perceived to be the benefits of the LR-SEL activities they felt were most promising. Many interviewees mentioned the positive mental health and academic benefits they associated with these activities.

Six participants mentioned a variety of benefits connected to teachers' overall well-being and how that, in turn, better served students. Respondents said that supporting teachers through the LR-SEL programming aided them in learning to take care of themselves so they were better equipped to take care of their students. One participant said,

I think it's just the mental health supports, and the sense of belonging, and different things that teachers are being able [to use] to better understand the resources that are out there to be able to support their students across their diverse backgrounds. And so I think that's been a big [help in] just opening the door to the fact that we need to discuss SEL supports more for students, but then also having the conversation that in the past we didn't focus on the teachers as much, and so now we can't help our students if the teachers aren't focusing on themselves first.

Further, five interviewees shared that the LR-SEL programming introduced a common language around trauma, behavior, and self-care that was not often taught in teachers' preservice training. In turn, the self-awareness learned by educators in these activities could help schools better align PD opportunities according to the expressed needs of their staff.

Four interviewees discussed how the LR-SEL activities created a school climate more conducive to learning. Teachers were empowered to build appropriate relationships with their students and to be in tune with their academic and social-emotional needs. One participant mentioned that it was helpful for educators and students alike to be able to identify mental health challenges and their impacts in the classroom:

You're not going to learn unless you're regulated, students and staff. An unregulated educator is not going to be able to regulate a classroom or assist students in that piece.

Finally, three participants spoke to the importance of talking about mental health and social-emotional work more openly rather than avoiding these difficult topics. In having conversations about SEL and mental health with teachers, administrators, and other staff, the topics were no longer relegated only to counselors, and mental health could be seen as an important component of comprehensive student support to be worked into district action plans.

Sustainability Plans

We asked participants to share their thoughts on how they would sustain the LR-SEL programming once the ESSER funds ran out. Eleven of the 40 interviewees said that their plans were to build the internal capacity of districts and schools so that they would have the structures in place to support the work after the grant funding ended. In some cases, interviewees described this as building the capacity of teachers and paraprofessionals to provide SEL services to their peers who were previously provided by ROEs, which would be reinforced by counselors or social workers at the school already trained to identify and address SEL-related issues. One interviewee described this as “help[ing] teachers identify what they think they need to stand up on their own.” Others described building the capacity of a larger team that would develop a long-term strategic plan based on the TRS-IA. One SEL coach stated that she is actively building these sustainability considerations into schools’ action plans.

In addition to building capacity among a schoolwide team, a few interviewees noted that they had plans to pursue other grants to continue the work. Several SEL coach positions were being partially or fully funded through ESSER, so many ROEs would need to apply for grants to retain the individuals in those roles and to continue supporting schools. As one interviewee said, grant writing for these positions is part of their ROE’s “lifeblood.” Two other interviewees said that they would lean on local revenue sources to support SEL-related activities and supports after the ESSER funding ends, whereas a couple others described moving to a fee-for-service model to ensure the continuity of SEL coaches.

Notably, some interviewees believed that the perception of the work’s value was critical to sustainability. One interviewee stated that the work could be sustained with braided funding, but only if partnering schools continued to value the work. Another interviewee had plans to ask local businesses to support the community partnership work after the grant period, which he hoped would be successful if businesses saw the value of the work and were involved in celebrations of its success. Further, one interviewee shared that superintendent’s willpower to continue the work, which could drive perceptions of value, may help ensure its sustainability.

Needed Structural or Systemic Changes

Five interviewees suggested school- and district-level cultural and structural changes that could sustain the work. For example, a couple interviewees suggested that schools build a culture of collective responsibility through continuous improvement measurement. This would help create buy-in among staff and “show them that their efforts matter both for children and for adults matters in building sustainability.” Another interviewee shared that parent involvement and buy-in was also critical to sustaining the work and that schools needed to systematically include them in SEL programming and decisions. Similarly, another interviewee suggested that schools communicate a common understanding of SEL to build staff and broader community buy-in. As she pointed out,

Your central office has to understand SEL and support it. It’s the work of everybody. That’s sustainability in central office, and then in moving this forward, you’ve got to have a committee, a committee made up of teachers, union, principals, students, and student support people. You spread that out. It can’t just fall on one person or one group.

In terms of structural changes, one interviewee suggested that each district identify a liaison who would work with the ROEs to continue identifying PD needs, participating in SEL trainings and activities, sharing resources, and

taking the information they learned back to district schools. Finally, one interviewee believed that a line item would need to be created in the state budget to sustain the work.

Sustainability Challenges

Some challenges emerged from the interviews related to political and bureaucratic constraints. One interviewee felt that education initiatives had trouble continuing “for longer than one run of the governor.” He elaborated that new grants, ideas, and campaigns often introduced new processes that conflicted with already established processes; the interviewee worried that this would be the case with the SEL- and trauma-responsive work. Another interviewee described challenges with the accessibility of IL-EMPOWER, a tool that supports districts, schools, and teachers in developing improvement plans. He asserted that the tool was a disjointed funding source with too many barriers (e.g., paperwork, bid buys), ultimately preventing schools from leveraging it for school improvement.



Conclusion and Key Takeaways

Our first year of interviews with 40 SEL Hub, ROE, and ISC leaders and staff yielded important insights into how LR-SEL programs are unfolding. Our team learned how ROEs and SEL Hubs leveraged grant funding for specific positions, such as SEL coaches and specialists, and that the structure of LR-SEL supports, meetings, and touch points with schools and districts all differed greatly across regions.

We learned that the decentralized nature of program implementation has both strengths and limitations, which we plan to explore further in future years of the study. For example, the largely school- and district-driven process of identifying needs and bringing them to ROEs and SEL Hubs has allowed regions to flexibly support individual schools or districts with SEL programming. This appears to be a strength of the initiative, as it has allowed ROEs to meet schools and districts where they are—both in terms of capacity and readiness to incorporate SEL. It is also possible that this could have reduced pressure on schools and districts, which according to some ROE and SEL Hub staff, perceive LR-SEL in a positive light—as a free resource rather than a state program with which they must comply. Another possible implication of this flexible, local implementation is that participation partially hinges on schools and district buy-in to the concept of SEL rather than buy-in to the grant program.

A potential challenge of this structure that surfaced during interviews was the lack of clarity about LR-SEL requirements, including participation targets, tracking, definitions, and what constitutes implementation progress. The regional differences in how best to implement the program has contributed to variability across regions and subsequent tracking and measurement challenges. However, a prominent theme from this first year of the study was how SEL Hub, ROE, and ISC leaders and staff have addressed this variability by increasing opportunities for collaboration to avoid reinventing the wheel. Several staff members spoke positively about the SEL Hub touch points with ROE staff and other formal and informal touch points within and across regions to replicate or implement SEL activities, events, and trainings. In this way, the grant has encouraged regional leaders and staff to break from their own silos and leverage each others' expertise and experience in new ways.

Illinois regional leaders and staff also expressed some apprehension about how LR-SEL programming would continue after the grant funding ended, with most hoping to build the internal capacity of schools and districts to take on the work. Although this may be viable for schools and districts who feel ready to implement SEL programming now, it may limit the ability of other schools and districts to participate in the future if they are not yet ready to implement SEL because of local conditions (e.g., leadership turnover or capacity). It may also limit the success of SEL integration for schools and districts that do not have the capacity to absorb the training or other work previously performed by ROE or SEL coaches. Further, the free nature of the LR-SEL supports, services, and resources was described as a core appeal for districts and schools. When this is no longer the case, fewer schools may be interested in participating in SEL activities, events, and trainings or in implementing them.

Finally, the information shared by participants has helped us answer our two main RQs:

RQ1 | What LR-SEL supports and services are being implemented across the state's ROEs, districts, and schools?

RQ2 | What do state, district, and school staff identify as the facilitators and barriers to successful implementation of social and emotional supports for educators?

Participant responses as well as SEL Hub participation trackers have shed light on the vast array of SEL activities, events, and trainings associated with REACH, SEL Hubs, and ROEs. The most common LR-SEL professional learning opportunities offered included educator and student mental health and wellness, trauma-related trainings (understanding trauma and strategies to address it at school), discipline and behavioral management, and restorative practices (RQ1).

The main facilitators of participation noted by SEL Hub, ROE, and ISC staff included using school improvement days or institute days for professional-learning events, offering virtual attendance options, and identifying school or district needs. The conditions and strategies supporting implementation include district leadership support and championing, cross-agency collaboration, the hub serving as a central warehouse for LR-SEL information, and strong ROE relationships with schools and districts (RQ2). The key barriers that SEL Hub, ROE, and ISC staff noted included school staffing shortages, a feeling of initiative fatigue, ROEs' lack of capacity to support regions with many schools, and district and school staff not always seeing the need or value of SEL (RQ2). In future years, we will continue to dig into these questions, emergent themes, and key takeaways while extending the work to develop in-depth profiles of school-level implementation efforts.



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