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# Trauma-Sensitive Schools and Social and Emotional Learning: An Integration

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This issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University, is one of a series of briefs that addresses the future needs and challenges for research, practice, and policy on social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. This is the second series of briefs that address SEL, made possible through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The first set synthesized current SEL research on early support for parent engagement and its effects on child outcomes; SEL in infancy/toddlerhood, the preschool years, the elementary school period, and middle-high school timeframes; and how SEL influences teacher well-being, health equity, and school climate. Learn more at prevention.psu.edu/sel.

# Executive Summary

The majority of youth in the United States will be exposed to at least one traumatic event before the age of 18; many will be exposed to multiple traumatic experiences.[1–3] In some cases, adversity (or its consequences) can be prevented, buffered, or healed. In other cases, its consequences can be overcome and transcended. Adopting a whole-child approach in educational settings requires an integrated understanding of child development, the potential effects of adversity and trauma, and related practices to support social, emotional, and academic success for all students. While the country continues to navigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and the most recent incidents of traumatizing racial violence, the need to acknowledge, address, and mitigate the disparate effects of trauma and avoid replicating inequitable structures across school communities has never been more pressing.

Safe, equitable, and engaging learning environments can prevent and mitigate the effects of trauma and help students build skills that foster resilience en route to lifelong thriving. The term *trauma-sensitive schools* (TSS) refers to a schoolwide approach to understanding and addressing trauma and fostering healing and resilience in the face of adversity. *Social and emotional learning* (SEL) refers to the process by which youth and adults acquire and apply intrapersonal, interpersonal, problem-solving, and decision-making skills that are key for success in school, career, and life. Used together, schoolwide SEL and TSS support a holistic approach to meeting student needs, particularly when focused on enhancing individual skill-building and environmental conditions that support student well-being and advance educational equity.

This brief will examine how TSS and SEL can be integrated and expanded—through shared understanding and vision, a readiness to integrate approaches, a shift in mindsets, joint implementation and evaluation, support of adult SEL, and an enhanced equity lens—to create safe, supportive, and culturally responsive schools that prevent school-related trauma and foster thriving, robust equity, and transformative learning.

In this issue brief, we use the terms trauma-sensitive schools, trauma-sensitive schools approach, and trauma sensitivity to refer to a whole-school approach to addressing trauma, which is denoted as TSS throughout the brief. The term trauma-informed schools also is used to refer to universal practices but is sometimes used interchangeably with targeted clinical interventions, so to avoid this confusion and maintain our focus on universal strategies, we use trauma-sensitive. For simplicity, this issue brief does not use additional terms such as trauma-responsive and trauma-engaged schools, though these also describe a whole-school approach.

# Introduction

Exposure to trauma has far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, communities, and society. Potentially traumatic experiences include abuse and neglect; family, school, and community-related violence; war and dislocation; natural disasters and pandemics; stressors associated with poverty and economic distress; and racism and discrimination. Unaddressed trauma can have profoundly negative effects on social, emotional, and cognitive development as well as the capacity for learning.[4–6]

Supporting the whole child requires school staff to be aware of the types, prevalence, and effects of adversity and trauma within their school community and the implications for promoting resilience. This means that they act in a manner that creates optimal conditions for learning for all students, including those affected by trauma. Educators who are unaware of how trauma manifests itself and what is needed to promote healing and well-being may respond to students in ways that cause additional harm. Potentially traumatizing or retraumatizing practices in school settings include employing harsh, shaming, and biased discipline practices, such as exclusionary practices, corporal punishment, restraint, and seclusion. Other retraumatizing practices may include allowing environments to become chaotic, disorganized, unpredictable, or unsafe; treating students disrespectfully; and minimizing students' voices and experiences. By mitigating the effects of trauma, preventing school-based traumatization, and helping students build the skills to foster resilience, we can foster safe, equitable, engaging, and productive learning environments in which every student has opportunities to thrive. This awareness is critical for all school staff but particularly in schools in which students are disproportionately affected by the collective trauma associated with COVID-19, health disparities, racism, prejudice, and violence.

Thriving and well-being mean that students have opportunities to develop competencies and to access supportive ecological conditions (e.g., societal, community, family, school, classroom).[7] SEL helps children and adults develop the skills necessary to thrive, whether or not they have encountered adversity, and it reinforces these competencies at all levels in the school. TSS brings an awareness of traumas that affect students and staff, and associated healing practices that can be part of education settings. The goal is to ensure that all aspects of the education environment—from workforce training, to teacher responses to students and families, to procedures and policies—are grounded in an understanding of trauma and its effects, and are designed to foster resilience.[8] Both approaches help move beyond a narrow approach to schooling that is limited to academic content while ignoring the barriers to and conditions for learning. Instead, both approaches can enable educators to promote healing and to advance educational equity, by addressing matters of individual voice and agency as well as the environmental factors that influence well-being.[9]

### Effects of Trauma on Social and Emotional Development

Exposure to trauma can negatively affect the capacity to:

- self-regulate;
- be self-and other-aware;
- engage socially and form relationships; and
- attend to information, assess situations, and make decisions.

Together, TSS and SEL—when done in a culturally affirming and responsive manner—can promote resilience-related skill-building and provide opportunities in which these skills can be applied and reinforced.

Although both schoolwide SEL and TSS have been adopted to some degree in schools, there is often an incomplete understanding of each, and educators sometimes use the terms interchangeably. School leaders often initiate parallel implementation efforts, which risk creating fragmented, confusing, or contradictory messaging and a sense of competing priorities (e.g., for time and focus). The events of the past year have put a spotlight on SEL and trauma as educators seek to minimize the impact of adversity on students. This presents an opportunity to reexamine how to support students by integrating TSS and SEL for maximum impact. Integration requires a clear understanding of each approach, a commitment to supporting the mindset and practice shifts required of staff to adopt both approaches successfully, and direction on coordination and training for sustainable implementation. This type of systems change effort is not without challenges because it requires schools and their staffs to shift toward proactive, schoolwide approaches, and to assume a shared responsibility for addressing student trauma and social and emotional development. There is a concurrent need to balance staff training to support daily practice with larger efforts to modify and strengthen the systems and structures needed to adopt and sustain these approaches schoolwide, and to perform all this work while attending to student identities, culture, voice, and agency.

The issue brief points to key strategies for integrating TSS and schoolwide SEL: developing a shared understanding, supporting staff readiness to adopt the approaches, shifting mindsets, initiating a joint implementation process, starting with adult SEL, and expanding both TSS and SEL to support robust equity. The brief concludes with examples of future opportunities to extend the integration of TSS and SEL to optimize student development and positive youth outcomes.

## Key Terms

**Trauma:** The term trauma is used to describe an event, a series of events, or a set of circumstances experienced as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening. Trauma overwhelms one's ability to cope and has adverse effects on a person's mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.[10]

**Trauma-sensitive schools (TSS):** This term refers to a schoolwide strategy for addressing trauma in which all aspects of the education environment (e.g., teacher preparation, family engagement, procedures and policies) are grounded in an understanding of trauma and its effects and are designed to promote resilience for all.[8]

**Social and emotional learning (SEL):** SEL refers to the process of developing and using the skills, knowledge, and mindsets that help humans identify and regulate emotions, develop and maintain a sense of self-identity and positive relationships, feel and show empathy for others, make responsible and caring choices, solve problems, and achieve personal and collective goals. Schoolwide SEL is a systemic approach to infusing SEL into students' educational experiences—across all classrooms, during all parts of the school day and out-of-school time, and in partnership with families and communities.[11]

**Transformative SEL:** Transformative SEL refers to a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences; learn to critically examine root causes of inequity; and develop collaborative solutions to community and societal problems.[12]

**Robust equity:** Robust equity counters inequality, institutionalized privilege and prejudice, and systemic deficits, and intentionally promotes thriving across multiple domains for those who experience inequity and injustice. It is collective as well as individual and includes access to transformative social, emotional, and cognitive learning experiences.[7]

# Key Integration Strategies

Key strategies for integrating and expanding SEL and TSS include the following: (1) develop a shared understanding and integrated vision, (2) build readiness, (3) shift mindsets, (4) initiate joint implementation, (5) start with adult SEL and well-being, and (6) foster robust equity. Together, these strategies lead to an integrated and transformative TSS and SEL approach that is centered on student well-being, resilience, and equity.

## Develop a Shared Understanding and Integrated Vision

An important first step toward integrating TSS and SEL is to develop a shared understanding of the history and evolution of both approaches, the unique elements of each, and the areas of convergence. By exploring their origins and what each offers to support student well-being and resilience, school staff achieve clarity on the benefits of both and learn how one supports the other while minimizing conflation of the terms. A shared understanding of TSS and SEL among school and district staff can contribute to an integrated, schoolwide vision to help students thrive.

### TSS and SEL: Unique Origins and Converging Trajectories

Both TSS and SEL are grounded in the science of learning and child development. Although they share similarities, their origins and contributions are distinct. Addressing trauma in school settings has historically been focused at the level of the individual student and is rooted in providing individual clinical treatments to address trauma-related symptoms. Although valuable, a focus on clinical treatment tends toward an individual focus, and at times, a deficit-based and potentially stigmatizing approach that ignores broader contextual factors and injustices.[13, 14] Throughout the past decade, the focus for addressing trauma has expanded to include schoolwide efforts to recognize and respond to trauma and to foster healing and resilience-building in the education setting. A TSS approach builds staff awareness and understanding of trauma and its effects, creates safe and supportive environments, eliminates retraumatizing practices, adapts policies and procedures to align with a trauma-sensitive vision, empowers youth and families, and builds social and emotional skills.[8] School-level models for addressing trauma apply, extend, and adapt therapeutic strategies for fostering healing to the learning environment (see Table 1 for examples).

### Developing an Integrated Vision

The book Creating safe, equitable, and engaging schools details a comprehensive approach relevant to aligning, integrating, and implementing TSS and SEL. State agencies in Alaska and Connecticut and a regional agency in Texas have started to use this approach to coordinate their efforts and to develop an integrated vision for student well-being and support.

### Table 1. Examples of School-level Trauma Models and Frameworks

**The Inquiry-based Process for Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools.** The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI), a partnership between the Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School, has developed an inquiry-based process for developing trauma-sensitive schools. This process promotes whole-school culture change by helping educators ensure that trauma sensitivity is infused into key aspects of school operations: leadership; professional development; resources, supports, and services for students, family, and staff; classroom strategies (academic and nonacademic); policies, procedures, and protocols; and family engagement. Educators are supported in thinking about and fostering whole-school trauma sensitivity through self-identified priorities tailored to the context of their schools and the needs of their students and staff.[15]

**Compassionate School Framework.** In 2009, the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, in partnership with Western Washington University, released *The heart of learning and teaching: Compassion, resiliency, and academic success.* In this book, they introduce the Compassionate School framework and the process for addressing student trauma schoolwide. Washington state and others are implementing the Compassionate School framework.[16, 17]

**Collaborative Learning for Educational Achievement and Resilience (CLEAR).** CLEAR is an evidence-informed whole-school model that incorporates recommendations on trauma-informed systems change into staff development, consultation, and support for educators. The CLEAR systems change process focuses on professional development to build expertise in trauma-informed practices and integrate these into routine school instructional and student support practices.

**The Neurosequential Model in Education (NME).** This approach draws on the Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics, an evidence-based framework developed by Dr. Bruce Perry, as a developmentally informed, biologically respectful approach to working with children who have experienced adversity. NME helps educators and students understand and apply an understanding of neurobiological development and trauma-informed practice to teaching and learning.

SEL provides the foundation for improved social, health, behavioral, and academic outcomes.[18] SEL's roots lie in school-based, universal mental health promotion and prevention. SEL emerged from the recognition that positive social and emotional development sets the foundation for academic success. Although SEL exists in many forms, educators often employ it as a specific program, curriculum, or set of instructional practices that builds essential skills, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships, and decision-making.[11] More recently, the focus of SEL has expanded to a schoolwide approach that involves infusing SEL into all aspects of students' education experiences, including as part of classroom/instructional practices, academic content, schoolwide policies, organizational structures, and relationships that promote belonging and agency for all students.[19, 20]

Though the benefits of SEL are evident, similar to addressing student trauma, this approach is not without its challenges and areas for growth. First, SEL's roots in White middle-class cultural norms can lead educators to ignore or overlook the perspectives, identities, backgrounds, and cultures of their students**.** Next, as a universal intervention, SEL is often not differentiated for young people who exhibit greater behavioral health needs, including students with trauma-related responses who may require additional support or adaptation of traditional SEL practices. Finally, SEL can be misused as a tool to control behavior rather than to build student competencies and agency.[21, 22] This is also an issue when trauma-sensitive practices are employed primarily as a means to ensure student compliance as opposed to healing and empowerment.

TSS and SEL have different origin stories, but they have a shared an increasingly intersecting trajectory. In recent decades, both TSS and SEL extended their purview beyond individual skill-building to include broader conditions for teaching, learning, and well-being by emphasizing the importance of school climate and integration of SEL and trauma sensitivity into daily practice, along with an expanding focus on issues of equity. Both approaches are guided by common principles, such as safety, supportive relationships, youth and family empowerment, cultural competence, and focus on well-being. Each approach also highlights the other as a part of a larger vision for schools.[8, 11] Together, when they attend to culture, agency, and identity, SEL and TSS help to promote the environmental conditions and individual skills necessary to help all students to thrive, thereby supporting equity.

With a clear understanding of complementarity, educators, in partnership with students and families, can work to articulate a shared vision for their schools and classrooms that includes a commitment to integrating both approaches to further their goal of creating safe, equitable, and engaging learning environments. Though this brief focuses on TSS and SEL, integration need not end with these two approaches. Integrating TSS and SEL promotes a continually expanding vision for schools that includes adopting other trauma-sensitive, relational approaches that foster well-being and reduce inequities, including restorative practices and other positive approaches to discipline and school climate (see "Developing an Integrated Vision" [call-out box, p. 6] for a resource to align multiple efforts).

## Build Readiness

Readiness is the extent to which individuals and organizations are motivated and have the innovation-specific and general capacities necessary to implement a particular intervention or approach.[23] Readiness is a developmental and dynamic process that evolves over time.[24]

Motivation to adopt new efforts can be influenced by the extent to which staff see these approaches as (a) better than what is already in place; (b) consistent with their current values and the norms of the school; (c) understandable and easy to implement; (d) testable with observable results; and (e) a priority over other interventions.[23] School leadership that design their SEL and TSS training processes with key aspects of readiness in mind can ensure they address legitimate logistical concerns about general and innovation-specific capacity. Approaches such as the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (see CBAM call-out box) help leaders determine and assess readiness.[25]

### The Concerns-Based Adoption Model

The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) is a research-based framework that provides tools and techniques for facilitating and assessing the implementation of an innovation. Specifically, CBAM offers sensitivity to the readiness-related concerns and social and emotional needs of implementers (i.e., school-based staff) as well as students and families. CBAM helps to facilitate how the components of TSS and SEL "fit" together and offers deliberate design of actions or strategies that will drive implementation and move the change process forward, along with tools for assessing/monitoring implementation.

The Austin Independent School District used CBAM in its efforts to examine readiness to integrate SEL, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive practices.

## Shift Mindsets

SEL and TSS approaches require a paradigm shift in educator perspective from a traditional mindset on teaching and learning to a transformative viewpoint that considers the impact of adversity and trauma, including implicit biases, prejudiced beliefs, racism, and other forms of institutionalized privilege, and the perspectives needed to foster well-being, resilience, and equity (see Table 2).

### Table 2. Shifting Perspectives: Traditional to Transformative[8, 28]

| Traditional Mindset | Transformative: TSS, SEL, and Equity Mindset |
|---|---|
| **Judgmental:** Takes student behaviors at face value and assumes that behaviors are purposeful and even personal. Negative labels are often applied to students experiencing difficulties (e.g., manipulative, lazy, resistant, noncompliant, attention-seeking). | **Curious:** Considers whether behaviors may be ways of coping with traumatic experiences. Adults consider the purpose of the behavior, and negative labels are replaced (e.g., "trying to get their needs met" or "triggered by authority figures"). |
| **Obedience:** Considers adults as the experts who know what is best for youth. The focus is on compliance. Adults may be easily offended when students do not follow their directions or recommendations. | **Empowerment:** Considers youth as the experts in their own experiences. Educators view themselves as partners with youth and see force and coercion as antithetical to engagement, learning, and healing. |
| **Individual:** Focus for change is on the individual. There is a belief that the solution is for students to "fix" their behaviors. Assumes behaviors reflect individual deficiencies, with less consideration for the larger contextual issues at play. | **Environmental:** Takes a more holistic view of healing and resilience-building. Adults consider how external factors (e.g., school, community, societal), including systemic inequities, influence students, and work to promote positive, healing environments and communities. |
| **Deficit-based/Reactive:** Focuses on reducing problem behaviors. Minimal crisis prevention planning or debrief for learning. | **Strengths-based/Proactive:** Focuses on identifying and promoting strengths and opportunities for growth. Intentional focus on preventing crises/retraumatization. |
| **Power Over:** Sees youth as broken and vulnerable, and needing protection from themselves. Relationships are hierarchical; power-sharing is limited. Rigid, rule-based, and authority-driven. | **Power With:** Understands that providing choice, autonomy, and control is central to positive development and healing. Relationships are collaborative; power is shared, flexible; offers choice; student-driven. Attention to *how* rules are enforced. |
| **Punitive:** Punitive approaches "done to" students are most effective for addressing problem behaviors. Limited understanding of root causes. | **Restorative:** Positive, relational approaches "done with" students are most effective for addressing problem behavior. Addresses root causes and focuses on repairing harm and skill-building. |
| **Siloed:** Believes that support for students exposed to trauma should be left to counseling professionals. | **Integrated:** Assumes a shared responsibility for addressing trauma. All staff have a role to play. |
| **Operates from Dominant Culture:** Adopts a "one-size-fits all" approach, with learning, environment, and services designed based on the perspective of the dominant culture. | **Cultural Humility:** Seeks to understand and convey respect for the diverse cultural values, beliefs, and practices of all in the school community, and integrates culturally responsive instruction and services. |

Notes: TSS = trauma-sensitive schools; SEL = social and emotional learning

If educators begin with good intentions, but without self-awareness and understanding of their own mindsets and patterns of response to students—particularly under stress, they may lack awareness of implicit biases and prejudiced beliefs that inform behavior and interfere with their ability to adopt different strategies.[21, 26] Leadership often is asked to provide concrete "strategies" that include classroom practices for educators to use. Although these methods and tools are important, if enacted in isolation from the underlying mindset shifts, adults may not see the intended results and thus may be less motivated to continue. Ultimately, moving from awareness (mindset) to adoption (action) requires consciousness and conscientiousness on the part of educators to learn and use teaching practices that promote student engagement, including welcoming and appreciating individual and social identities.[27]

## Initiate a Joint Implementation Process

Adoption of TSS and schoolwide SEL follows similar and often parallel implementation pathways. Educators can save time and resources by considering how to bring the two together; there is evidence of effective integration in schools (see Table 3). Approaches for integrating implementation processes include:

- **Joint teaming to support adoption.** Although a small number of teams may be more productive, districts and schools often have a range of teams working on various efforts (e.g., school climate teams, positive behavioral interventions and supports teams, multi-tiered system of supports teams, school emergency planning teams). Stand-alone teams reinforce fragmentation.[29] Integrating TSS and SEL implementation efforts begins by consolidating working groups or teams supporting these complementary aims to avoid duplication and fragmentation.

- **Combined professional development and practice application.** When combined, training and support help educators see how the approaches complement each other. Teachers who receive trauma training may be more willing to incorporate SEL in response to this new understanding of student needs. For staff in schools that already incorporate SEL, adding an awareness of trauma may not only solidify their commitment to supporting students' social and emotional well-being, but may provide deeper understanding of the neurobiological underpinnings and may illuminate necessary adaptations to daily practice. A trauma-informed lens also helps educators to better understand student needs so that SEL can be differentiated and tailored to support individual students.

  Integrating TSS and SEL is not accomplished through a one-time training but instead is built through ongoing learning and coaching to reinforce and apply core concepts (e.g., SEL and TSS principles, mindsets, and practices) continually. Engaging culturally and ethnically diverse stakeholders in developing and delivering training and support furthers efforts to ensure that TSS and SEL implementation is culturally responsive and supports larger efforts to transform systems. Training and implementation can and should include youth and families.

### Table 3. Examples of Trauma-Sensitive Schools and Social and Emotional Learning Integration

Chicago Public Schools' Healing Trauma Together (HTT) Program: The HTT program integrated trauma-sensitive practices and SEL in 10 high schools across Chicago under a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to promote mental health and facilitate recovery from traumatic exposure to violence and civil unrest. The program included training for educators and caregivers to recognize and respond to symptoms of trauma, a clinical intervention (Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress) for students who had experienced trauma, community mental health partnerships, and improvements to school staff teaming structures to improve coordination. Findings included workforce development gains, mental health delivery expansion, improved student perceptions of help, and increased staff use of classroom SEL.

Turnaround for Children (TFC): Turnaround for Children translates insights from the science of learning and development into tools and professional learning for educators that empower and equip them to adopt a whole-child approach. This approach calls for educators to be attuned and responsive to the needs of each student—a mindset shift that deeply integrates an understanding of stress and trauma and how to build developmental relationships and supportive environments in service of knowledge, skill, and mindset development. Utilizing a "learning by doing" model, educators work together in communities of practice to explore the science, reflect on their practice, and apply strategies and tools to redesign learning environments that nurture individual student development. Turnaround's Whole Child Inventory helps educators assess their school's current systems, structures, and practices; choose a direction; and monitor progress toward their goals.

Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) Trauma-Informed Schools: MNPS, the second largest urban school district in Tennessee, began taking a trauma-informed approach by knowledge-building and infusing strategies into existing SEL to more comprehensively support their students. They use a three-tiered model of prevention to systematically identify and deliver supports based on students' needs. Since adopting a trauma-sensitive approach with SEL, the district is seeing declines in student behavior referrals, suspensions, and expulsions.[31]

## Sample Strategies for Combined TSS and SEL Professional Learning and Application

- **Combine professional learning on topics that include:** the relationship between social and emotional development and trauma, including the neurobiology of stress and adversity; SEL in the classroom and related trauma considerations; effects of primary and secondary trauma on adults and related SEL skill-building and wellness strategies; and SEL-informed and trauma-sensitive considerations for practices, such as those related to engagement, behavior management, and discipline.

- **Provide ongoing professional learning that includes targeted practice applications.** For example, educators may receive training on trauma-sensitive and related SEL classroom strategies, and then focus on a "strategy for the month" (e.g., supporting emotional regulation/self-management). Teachers implement a chosen strategy and report back on that practice (e.g., calming breathing exercises and emotions check at the beginning and end of class). Breaking concepts down to simple components makes it easier for staff to understand and adopt. Teachers may try out practices together with their grade-level or department teams for added consistency and support.

- **Include youth and families as part of professional learning efforts,** including introducing concepts to youth and families and integrating them as co-facilitators to offer valuable perspectives on which strategies and approaches are most helpful.

- **Integrated monitoring and evaluation efforts.** School leadership should establish processes at the outset for monitoring and evaluating the impact of adopting a combined SEL/TSS approach. Student and family voices should be embedded into all aspects of monitoring and evaluation design, including having young people and families help to define key indicators of success and assess outcomes of SEL and TSS integration.[30] Including youth and family voices from the beginning ensures that educators define outcome goals based not just on educator needs but also on what students and families deem important.

  The fields of SEL and TSS have begun to identify key indicators of these approaches at a schoolwide level, and these tools may be used and further developed, aligned, and integrated to monitor progress and to assess common evaluation benchmarks.[8, 11, 15] Specific methods of collecting qualitative and quantitative data to assess change should be formally identified as part of a school's preparation for integration. Qualitative data may be collected through focus groups; document reviews; interviews with staff, students, and families; observations of how things have changed; and case studies. Quantitative data are gathered from such sources as pre- and post-knowledge surveys and existing measures of student behavior, academic achievement, and school climate.

## Start with Adult SEL and Well-Being

Effective adoption and integration of TSS and SEL must begin and continue with adult social and emotional competencies and well-being.[32, 33] Both SEL and TSS underscore the importance of adult self- and social-awareness, relationship skills, and self-care. Together, TSS and SEL can support a comprehensive approach to building a learning environment grounded in regulation, relationships, safety, and equity that starts with adults.

Educators with strong social and emotional and cultural competencies are better able to build strong relationships, connect with students and families, and remain regulated if tension arises.[7, 34, 35] However, unhappiness and high levels of stress and anxiety reduce working memory and compromise teachers' abilities to identify and address student needs.[36, 37] TSS brings an added awareness of the effects of trauma, both direct and indirect, on educators and the importance of stress management and resilience-building strategies.

Enhancing adult social and emotional competencies and prioritizing staff well-being can create the foundation for a more effective response to personal and interpersonal challenges, leaving teachers better equipped to model appropriate SEL competencies, and support wellness and resilience. Beginning with the adults in the school building may be met with some resistance from educators, as this represents a shift from more traditional approaches to teacher training. As educators launch SEL/TSS initiatives, there is an immediate desire for guidance on "what to do" rather than "how to be." An intentional focus on adults first conveys the message that a successful learning environment rests as much on how adults are with students as about what they do and can lead to increased ownership and internalizing of critical shifts that support sustainability. Well-being has a systemic component—not just at the individual teacher level—and requires creating systems and structures that foster adult resilience.[33]

## Foster Robust Equity

Although well intended, some equity efforts ignore institutionalized privilege and its impacts, and may inadvertently support inequity and disengage allies and students.[21, 38] Recent incidents of racial inequality and injustice further illustrate what many proponents of equity already know—more needs to be done to promote agency and to counter inequities caused by institutionalized privilege and prejudice. This cannot be the role of education alone, as sustained change requires concerted efforts across multiple systems. However, educators contribute to the problem by engaging in practices that perpetuate inequities rather than eliminating them. Therefore, educators should do their part by expanding the equity lens to include a more robust conceptualization of what equity means and how to achieve it.

TSS and SEL alone will neither eliminate trauma nor ensure that all students thrive socially, emotionally, and cognitively. However, these approaches are more likely to benefit students when focused on robust equity. Equitably focused TSS/SEL must address understanding, practice, and transformation. This means grounding TSS/SEL in addressing how racism and prejudice are incompatible with trauma sensitivity and social and emotional competence. It also involves a commitment to culturally responsive practice and to the elimination of inequities that are fueled by various forms of communal and systemic traumas. In educational settings, such traumas manifest in the form of microaggressions, culturally insensitive practices, biased discipline practices, and institutionalized prejudice and related assumptions about students and families that compromise engagement, connection, and community. An equity focus encourages educators to view TSS and SEL not as a means for student conformation or compliance, but as approaches that support student agency and equip people individually and collectively to eliminate the sources of stress and inequity.[7]

For TSS, this means using the trauma lens to examine not only individual traumatic experiences but to identify and address the cultural and structural violence that negatively affects groups of people and communities. This includes the effects of racial and historical trauma, stereotype threat, acculturative stress, and attacks on social identity—all of which may manifest at school and community levels.[7] For SEL, an expanded equity focus is reflected in the work of transformative SEL, which explicitly addresses power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination.[12] This includes teaching competencies that address racism and prejudice (e.g., explicit and implicit bias, understanding diversity, and honoring differences in perspectives and identity, social consciousness).

An integrated TSS/SEL approach brings the various elements together by including culturally and ethnically diverse stakeholders in crafting the vision of student success and cultivating a shared understanding that educators' and students' cultures can shape how they express themselves, and respond to and cope with trauma/adversity. TSS/SEL integration offers an opportunity to incorporate trauma-informed and culturally responsive schoolwide practices that grow the knowledge, skills, and mindsets of educators, students, and families. Doing this work with the explicit goal of robust equity can move educators one step closer to creating the learning environments that promote thriving while also contributing more directly by equipping adults and youth with the competencies and dispositions to collectively break down the systems that perpetuate inequities and counter institutionalized privilege and prejudice. The powerful combination of understanding and addressing historical and systemic traumas, creating safe and supportive environments, and building the student and adult social and emotional skills needed to navigate and counter these experiences has never been more critical. As educators reckon with issues of structural racism and bias, and reaffirm their commitment to improving the education experience, they will need to broaden their lens to ensure that the education system is more equitable for all students (see Table 4).

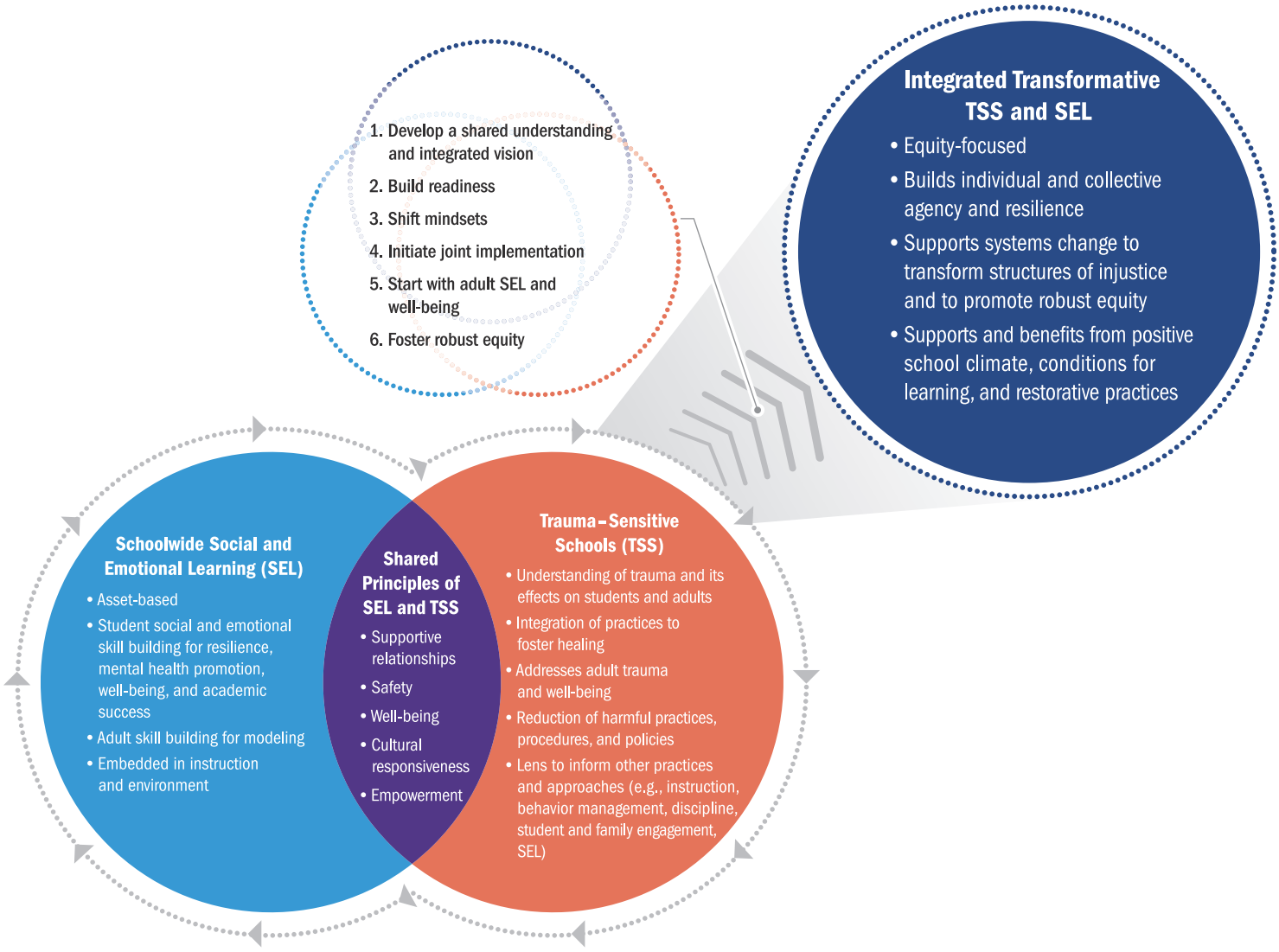
### Table 4. Integrating Trauma, Social and Emotional Learning, and Equity

Educators are explicitly making connections among TSS, SEL, and equity, and integrating these efforts.

- **Oakland Unified School District** has explicitly taken an equity approach to SEL and has worked to align its **African American Male Achievement Initiative** with its trauma-sensitive and restorative justice initiatives.
- **Ripple Effects** is a comprehensive SEL program that integrates trauma-informed and culturally responsive tools—this has been used, for example, in Cleveland Public Schools' planning centers.
- **Social, Emotional, and Ethical (SEE) Learning** is a K–12 education program developed by Emory University that expands on traditional SEL programming to include a focus on trauma-informed care, systems thinking, and ethical discernment.
- **Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS)**. HEARTS offers a whole-school multitiered approach to addressing trauma that explicitly centers equity and cultural humility in its model. Preliminary results showed increased staff awareness and use of trauma-informed classroom practices and improvements in student time on learning and school attendance.[39]

# Building Toward Integrated Transformative TSS and SEL

Together, the six key strategies outlined in this brief help to define, integrate, and expand TSS and SEL with equity efforts to advance a transformative approach that cannot be achieved by either alone.



# Challenges and Opportunities

To successfully integrate and sustain SEL and TSS, five potential challenges and associated opportunities for expansion must be addressed.

- **Institutionalized Inequity.** Institutionalized racism and privilege are baked into school practices and educator mindsets and routines. Educators must function in a way that centers the integration of TSS and SEL on robust equity and culturally responsive approaches to promote social, emotional, and cognitive thriving and address inequity individually and collectively through practice and policy.[7]

- **Fragmentation and Lack of Coherence.** School and district staff often implement many approaches and programs simultaneously, but in silos and without a shared vision or cohesive plan for adoption and sustainability. School leaders need support from district leadership to operationalize the integration of TSS, SEL, equity work, and other related approaches at the student, class, school, and district levels to move from fragmentation to alignment and, ultimately, to the integration of practices that are synergistic, resource-efficient, and sustainable.

- **Lack of or Insufficient Benchmarks for Monitoring and Evaluation.** Assessing the implementation and impact of TSS and schoolwide SEL can be challenging. Both encompass broad practices and culture shifts. Both influence physical environment and interactions between staff and students as well as policies and procedures, making it difficult to definitively link these practices to school- and student-level outcomes. Though the core elements of TSS and schoolwide SEL are starting to be more clearly defined, additional work is needed to articulate benchmarks of fidelity for each approach. To move forward, the evolution of TSS and SEL together will require (1) a clear set of integrated practice guidelines and benchmarks for implementation fidelity for TSS, SEL and equity, and (2) tools to measure effectiveness and degree of adoption of this integrated set of practices and its link to student-level indices of well-being.

- **Absence of Research on Schoolwide Approaches.** Research on the implementation and effects of whole-school approaches such as trauma sensitivity is lacking.[13, 40] The current research models for TSS and schoolwide SEL are limited by a lack of approach-specific and common indicators, variable-centered research that ignores the individuality of development, dominant intellectual perspectives that feature privileged White western voices, and approaches that ignore the impacts of culture, social structure, and other types of interventions. There is a need for more methodologically rigorous, mixed-methods longitudinal studies to build the evidence base for TSS and schoolwide SEL that are ecological, are sensitive to the individuality of development, utilize common indicators, build upon previous learning, and leverage the rich information brought by culturally diverse stakeholder perspectives.

- **Policy Barriers.** Addressing student trauma, promoting social and emotional development and well-being, and fostering conditions where all students can thrive requires support at the policy level. Staff from federal agencies, states, districts, and schools must examine how existing policies support or hinder these efforts. Opportunities related to policy include:

  - eliminating traumatizing policies that support harmful and exclusionary discipline (including corporal punishment), and integrating relational, restorative approaches;
  - incorporating robust and equitable measures for assessing school quality, including a focus on school culture and climate;
  - integrating TSS, SEL, and equity into state standards, guidance frameworks, academic standards, codes of conduct, and school improvement efforts;
  - prioritizing adult capacity-building in TSS, SEL, and culturally responsive and equitable practices;
  - shifting from compliance-driven approaches to practices that suit the contextual needs of schools; and
  - aligning policy goals and resources related to TSS, SEL, equity, and other efforts that support a shared vision and related outcomes for students.[41–43]

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Appendix

# Addressing Social and Emotional Learning and Trauma in an Online or Remote Environment

Students learn best in safe, supportive, and engaging environments, whether in-person or virtual. While today's arrangements for schooling (in-person mask-to-mask; remote; hybrid) vary from school to school, many educators continue to grapple with how to transfer their pedagogy online. Remote learning and traditional in-person instruction are not opposites—rather, they are permutations of instruction delivery. However, tactics for remote spaces require a pivot from in-person approaches. Creating effective remote learning spaces requires educators to prioritize building developmental relationships with students along with teaching content, and to embody strong social and emotional competencies (including self-regulation). Social and emotional learning (SEL) and trauma sensitivity play a central role in helping educators make this shift. Many opportunities to build student skills and competencies exist in remote classrooms—opportunities for common language, dialogue about racial injustice, and the building of individual and collective agency. For example, in remote learning, a teacher no longer stands at the front of the room. This might affect a teacher's sense of control or a student's desire to participate (especially adolescents who like to disappear into the back row of a class). Because students can all see each other as they could if desks were arranged in a circle rather than in rows, this format changes the interpersonal and power dynamics. SEL and trauma-sensitive practices are important tools to support the optimal conditions for learning and thriving in the virtual classroom.

In this appendix we offer sample strategies for how educators can integrate social and emotional learning and trauma-sensitive practices in an online environment to foster students' emotional safety, relationship-building, skill-building, and educator SEL and well-being.

## Sample Strategies for Supporting TSS and SEL Online

### Emotional Safety

- Smile and greet students and parents by name when you connect with them virtually. Ensure that all students feel welcomed, seen, and appreciated in the virtual space.
- Ask students what they need to feel safe and supported in the virtual environment and set clear behavioral norms and agreements as a classroom community based on what is needed for all to feel safe and connected. Review these norms and agreements regularly.
- Set clear expectations for online behavior as it relates to safety and respect, and clear consequences for cruelty and bullying online, including race-based bullying. Keep track of all online activity you can see—tell students to send you screenshots or videos of any abusive or harmful behavior toward others.
- Allow freedom in how and where students participate (e.g., sit, stand) in the virtual space. Teach them how to figure out what they need on their own and provide time for breaks, including camera breaks.
- Help students to see themselves in the virtual space. For example, allow students to create unique screen names or characters that represent them (e.g., older kids may create their own bitmojis for the virtual space).
- Adapt and incorporate existing in-person rituals to your virtual classroom (e.g., opening circles, morning meetings, or check-ins).
- Have pictures and/or written directions that outline what students should expect and do, and the schedule for the day. Post any materials or check-in videos for virtual learning at the same time every day.

- Demonstrate respect for all students in day-to-day virtual communications (e.g., correctly pronouncing names, using the preferred language to share information with families, being curious about and honoring students' cultural stories and experiences).
- Offer ways for students to connect with you if they need help or support (e.g., office hours, Google Forms, regular check-ins).
- Establish predictable routines. Doing so can lower stress and help students focus because they'll know what to expect.

## Relationship-building

- Use online tools to build community (e.g., apps that allow students to share photos and videos that classmates can watch and comment on; platforms such as Google Classroom that allow for sharing).
- Consider making regular inquiries to students and families (e.g., Are you able to access and find your class work? Are you having any issues with your internet connection or access?).
- Do individual check-ins or video conferences with students in your class (or homeroom or advisory).
- Identify student strengths and point them out by using the private chat or writing a quick note or email right after class to a student.
- Conduct virtual community-building check-in circles when needed (Check-In Circle for Community Building and virtual adaptation by Panorama).
- Follow up with an email or call to ask if a student is okay if they miss class.
- Build a virtual space for students to respond to daily or weekly prompts in writing, art, or photograph. For example, start a virtual class journal where students can read the journal entries of peers to build connection. (Google Template: Google Sign-in to continue to Forms)
- Conduct a virtual relationship mapping session with colleagues to identify adult connections among students and to target staff to support particular students at this time. (Virtual Relationship Mapping [Grades 6–12])

## Skill-building

- Incorporate grounding and mindfulness practices that support self-regulation and self-awareness (e.g., belly breathing, body scans and muscle relaxation, journaling, music, silence, movement). In an online space, these practices can be done verbally and through the use of virtual aids such as GIFs for breathing in and out and visual directions via camera for movement exercises, such as yoga poses.
- Ask students to identify how they are feeling, using tools such as mood meters, emojis or feelings faces, or scales that can be integrated in person and/or virtually at the beginning and end of lessons and during instruction as needed. Students can respond verbally, in the chat box, or using online meeting features such as drawing tools or stamps to indicate how they are feeling. If anonymity is desired, educators can poll students as part of a check-in process to get a sense of how the group is doing.
- Include regular checks for understanding during lessons to foster students' self-awareness.
- Use virtual classroom challenges and successes (e.g. challenges with technology, successfully navigating a new tool) as opportunities for teachable moments.
- Build in time for SEL lessons/curriculum.

## Instructional Practices

- Adjust your expectations of yourself and your students (not lowering them). Remote learning and hybrid learning will not be the same as in person. Be flexible in this new virtual learning environment (e.g., be open to trying new things; manage expectations of yourself and your students).
- Deliver content in smaller, more manageable increments in the online space to avoid overwhelming students.
- Adopt virtual learning practices that support equity (e.g., how and when you hold live events, materials used, accommodations by student need). Be mindful of the variation in students' capacity to manage remote learning and the impact of multiple stressors on families and communities.

- Offer students options for how they engage in class discussions. For example, teachers may work with students to develop various hand signals they can use to engage in discussion if they do not feel comfortable talking, particularly in the virtual space. [See, for example, this video.]
- Allow processing time in the online space (e.g., play calm music to indicate think time or transitions).
- Notice that wait time seems even longer on video, so when you're ready to speak again after a pause, try taking one more deep breath before speaking.
- Repeat yourself (even) more than you do in person, in case a loud noise, bad connection, or other distraction prevented student(s) from hearing it the first time.
- Incorporate materials and references that are culturally relevant to students, and link learning to what is happening and is relevant right now in the time of the pandemic (don't ignore the current moment).
- Use multiple forms of communication (e.g., email, text, mail, video) to engage with students and families.
- Consider alternate ways in which students can demonstrate what they have learned.

### Educator SEL and Well-being

- Create cues for practicing self-awareness and self-management throughout the day (e.g., moments in the day, particular activities, visual reminders); for example: "Before every Zoom meeting, I am going to take three deep breaths." or "After each transition, I will incorporate a 3-minute mindful breathing exercise with students."
- Be flexible and forgiving of yourself. Practice self-compassion along with compassion for colleagues, students, and families.
- Institute virtual support gatherings with colleagues. Sample activities include: (1) share empowering stories with colleagues; (2) institute a 15-minute morning coffee break with your teams; (3) do an end-of-day debrief session before you transition out of work time; and (4) pair and share: huddle with a smaller group of colleagues to share stressors and advice.
- Ask a colleague for permission to sign on to their remote class with students you know to make a guest appearance. You can lighten the load for each other, learn from each other, and provide feedback.
- Model what you do with students with your colleagues in adult spaces, such as staff and team meetings. For example, use opening activities to name emotions as part of adult check-ins with colleagues, and incorporate mindfulness practices and reflection exercises to build adult self-awareness and social awareness.
- Integrate engaging instructional activities during staff meetings, such as virtual break-out rooms and tools that allow for group discussion in the online space (e.g., Google Jamboard, Padlet) that teachers also can use with students.
- Normalize emotions and emotional difficulties at this time. Educators can engage in modeling that involves identifying their feelings during their time with students.
- Celebrate successes regularly via notes, emails, etc., and find opportunities for colleagues to come together just to have fun and build connection (e.g., virtual game nights).

## Additional Resources

- **Student Engagement in Online Classes: Tips for Teachers Based on Trauma-Informed Approaches and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Strategies.** Developed by the Region 6 of the National Comprehensive Center.
- **Trauma-Informed School Strategies during COVID-19.** Developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and includes strategies for supporting trauma-informed practice in schools in response to COVID-19.
- **A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching through Coronavirus.** Developed by Teaching Tolerance staff in response to COVID-19 and teaching in a virtual space.
- **Priority for Trauma-Sensitive Remote Learning: Keeping Connections Strong.** Developed by the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative.
- **Virtual and In-person Opening and Closing Routines.** Developed by Facing History and Ourselves.
- **Building Developmental Relationships during the COVID-19 Crisis.** Developed by the Search Institute.
- **Common Trauma Symptoms in Students and Helpful Strategies for Educators.** Developed by the Regional Education Laboratory (REL), Appalachia Cross-State Collaborative to Support Schools in the Opioid Crisis (CCSSO).