Practice

"We will build together": Sowing the seeds of SEL statewide

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ABSTRACT

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has been lauded as important for student success. However, little guidance is available for how educators, scholars, and policymakers can work together to improve SEL implementation in public schools across a state. Here, we describe CalHOPE Student Support – an effort to "sow the seeds" of SEL across California. Invoking the metaphor of a garden, we first discuss the historic developments in California that readied the ground for such work. Then, we lift up the voices of education leaders who have been catalysts for transforming the landscape. Next, we describe our collective vision for a "thriving garden" – the process and outcomes we aim to achieve. We then explain how we harmonized essential elements (e.g., information, support, values, and action) into a comprehensive system for statewide SEL implementation. Then, we share information about our garden's yield – our successes and ongoing struggles, through the voices of our collaborators. We end with a synthesis of lessons learned (e.g., build capacity for change-making, differentiate support, plan for turnover) for use by other educational leaders seeking to advance SEL in their regions.

What will it take to actually improve conditions for wellbeing in schools? If you are reading this article, you likely dream about school settings as places of connection and thriving for all students, and you likely believe in the benefits of social and emotional learning. At the same time, the systems-level changes that are necessary to actualize your vision may feel daunting – even overwhelming. Where do you begin? We wrote this article for educational leaders who are curious about efforts to align and support diverse SEL initiatives across a large geographic region through a shared process of improvement and a shared vision for thriving.

First, we describe the historic developments that created opportunities for co-learning and improvement on a statewide scale in the United States. Then, we describe the infrastructure, activities, experiences, and lessons learned from the work undertaken on behalf of six million students. In sharing our journey, we strive to illuminate our "why" as well as some of the complexities and synergies of statewide efforts. Ultimately, we hope to contribute to a forward-looking research, practice, and policy agenda for educational leaders seeking to advance a regional ("building-together") approach to *social and emotional learning* (SEL).

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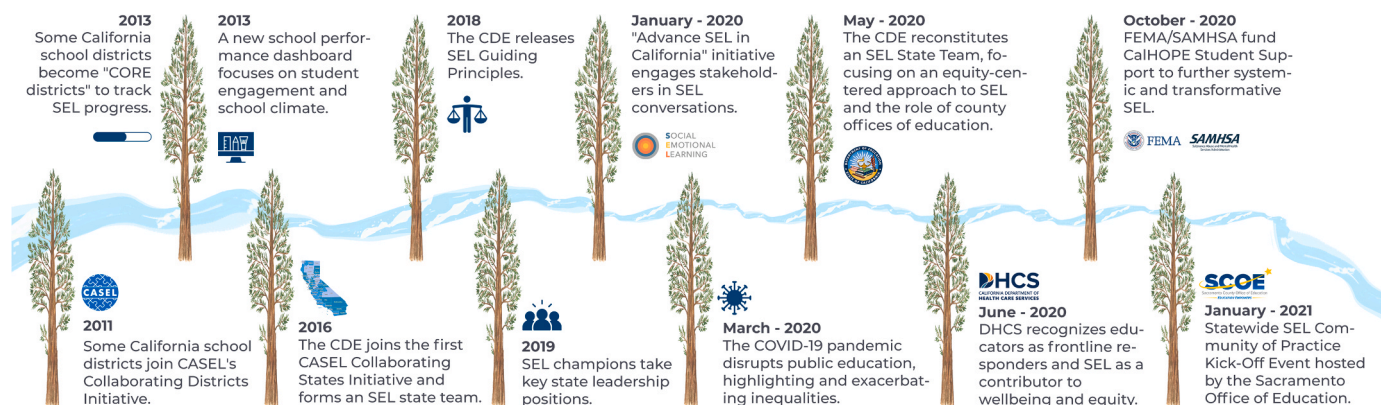[1] (retired)

Fig. 1. Timeline of California Efforts to Till the Soil for a Statewide Approach to Systemic SEL. Copyright retained by authors[2].

Social and emotional learning

Over the past 30 years, SEL has been popularized as "the process through which children and adults understand and apply emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (Collaborative for Academic & Emotional, 2019a). A synthesis of well-conducted studies revealed that SEL *programs* (i.e., curriculum or other well-documented strategies) can contribute to improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, and academic success among youth (Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2022). Consequently, CASEL Program Guides (2003, 2005, 2015) – compendia of exemplary SEL programs for students– were designed to help educational leaders select and adopt SEL programs for implementation. Although these resources are quite useful for facilitating the selection of SEL programs, they do not overcome the lack of inclusion of diverse students in the underlying studies of SEL programs (Rowe and Trickett, 2018) or themselves include a full spectrum of methods, from the micro (e.g., welcoming rituals) to the macro (non-exclusionary disciplinary practices) for practicing SEL with students. Central to our current focus, these program lists also underemphasize the concentric circles prominent in the CASEL framework, which represent the ecology of child development that spans from classrooms to communities. While the program guides emphasize classroom programs, which may each have some adjacent school-wide strategies, the "person-in-environment" perspective advances the idea that SEL is best practiced within the entire school and community through the broad engagement of adults and a larger system transformation.

Systemic SEL: an approach to larger system transformation

We understand *Systemic SEL* to be an approach to delivering SEL that engages each layer and component of our complex educational system to support, integrate, and sustain SEL across youth-serving contexts and over time. This approach suggests that educational leaders can achieve the best results from SEL when (1) foundational supports, such as SEL leadership teams, are in place, (2) adults improve their own SEL capacities and competencies, (3) students receive coordinated, high-quality SEL, and (4) feedback systems drive reflection and continuous improvement (Mahoney et al., 2021). Although there has been some investment in learning about and supporting school-wide and district-wide approaches to SEL delivery (e.g., CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative, CASEL's online District Resource Center), and some

activities at the state-level (e.g., the adoption of statewide SEL learning standards), there has not yet been guidance in the research literature for educational leaders intending to facilitate state-wide, multi-level, systemic SEL initiatives. This paper seeks to address that gap by sharing our learning from CalHOPE Student Support, an effort by practice and policy leaders in California to advance SEL statewide.

Tilling the soil in California: the context for transformation

Educational leaders in California have been learning and improving their systemic SEL implementation for over a decade (see Fig. 1). In 2011, the Oakland and Sacramento City Unified School Districts joined the CASEL's *Collaborating Districts Initiative*, sharing their goals, struggles, and successes with a nation hungry to learn about how to implement systemic SEL. In 2013, eight California school districts, using cross-district collaboration as an approach to improvement, together received a waiver to the federal No Child Left Behind Act, enabling these "*CORE districts*" (Knudson & Garibaldi, 2015) to pursue and acknowledge their annual progress through indicators of SEL. At the same time, a new *Local Control Funding Formula* led to the creation of a state school performance dashboard that required all schools to assess and address student engagement and school climate in public *Local Control and Accountability Plans* (Johnson & Tanner, 2018). We describe these policy evolutions and demonstration projects as "tilling the soil" for a statewide approach to systemic SEL.

A well-tilled soil facilitates germination – the process of something budding into existence. Accordingly, in 2016, the California Department of Education (CDE) participated in the first CASEL *Collaborating States Initiative* cohort, a professional learning community of 8 state education agencies working to create the conditions for high-quality, systemic SEL implementation across their respective states. With additional foundation funding, the CDE created a *Social and Emotional Learning State Team* comprised of representatives from 28 California education entities including school districts, county offices of education, labor unions, colleges and universities, and non-profit organizations ranging from those who grant or administer funds (e.g., First 5 California) to those that advocate for specific voices (e.g., California Parent Teacher Association) or values (e.g., Californians for Justice). This workgroup crafted consensus *SEL Guiding Principles* (see Appendix A) that were distributed as a resource that Local Education Agencies (LEAs; e.g. districts) could use in their local SEL implementation.

In January 2019, several people took key state level leadership positions, championing SEL implementation in K-12 education. Governor Newsom was elected on a platform to address inequities in the public education system, and First Partner Siebel Newsom dedicated her office to advancing whole child development. Tony Thurmond became the first Afro-Latino person and first social worker to serve as the California

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[2] Please inquire with the corresponding author for permission to copy or reproduce images.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Linda Darling-Hammond, a national expert in the science of learning and development, and strong SEL advocate, became president of the State Board of Education. "Advance SEL in California" was launched in January 2020 to engage stakeholders in conversations around barriers, needs, and goals related to SEL implementation in schools. The group heard from nearly 800 educators, community partners, youth, and families, generating recommendations for educational leaders, including: (1) make SEL the cornerstone of California's education system; (2) align SEL efforts at and between the state-, county-, and district levels; (3) emphasize SEL supports for adult capacity building; and (4) invite, listen, and lift up less powerful voices to co-design solutions for schools (Education First, 2020, p. 15).

An unprecedented societal storm: historic events of 2020

In the spring of 2020, the emergence of the novel coronavirus upended the education system in California and around the world, causing a disruption to the routines and relationships of all young people, and exacerbating and amplifying systemic inequalities (Tan et al., 2022). Though California's shelter-in-place order was decidedly important for reducing COVID-19 case numbers and deaths (Friedson et al., 2021), the ruptures in daily life, coupled with the experiences of trauma, grief, and loss, impacted California's youth in myriad ways. Isolation from peers, community members, and health and human services to slow viral transition, also removed support, structure, scaffolds, and safety nets from many young people (Zhu et al., 2021). The shift to virtual or remote instruction may have contributed to academic disengagement (Jones et al., 2021), "unfinished learning" (Dorn et al., 2021), and learning lags (Pier et al., 2021).

At the same time, we also saw increasing confrontation with the history of race and racism in the United States (Hammonds, 2021), propelled forward by well-documented instances of police brutality within the Black community (Thomas et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021) and increasing incidents of hate crimes against the Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander communities (Shimkhada & Ponce, 2022). The combination of all these conditions yielded what the Little Hoover Commission coined a "perfect storm of stress, anxiety, and trauma, exacerbating a preexisting crisis in children's mental health" (p. 3). California youth reported increases in anxiety and depression that would require "time, support, and investment" (Little Hoover Commission, 2021 p. 3) to address. This societal storm was unprecedented in our collective experience, yet the earlier groundwork provided a foundation for moving forward together.

The CDE revived and reconstituted a virtual *Social and Emotional Learning State Team* in May 2020, now with representation from 48 organizations, to make actionable recommendations to address the emergent context. The team, and subsequently, the CDE, elevated an equity-centered approach to SEL–*transformative social and emotional learning (tSEL)*[3]–which critically examines root causes of inequity, empowers youth, and co-constructs learning conditions that promote equity and inclusion (Jagers et al., 2021; Jagers et al., 2019). One accomplishment of the team was the creation of resources that distilled the social and emotional *competencies* (i.e., dispositions and skills that emerge through processes of human development) and *conditions* (i.e., features of the social environment that support growth and thriving) that are required for successful leading, teaching, and learning. Drawing on these ideas, the team curated resources to promote the competencies and conditions for thriving in California schools. Along with these resources, they issued recommendations to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction that included: (1) championing transformative SEL as

a tool for equity, and (2) building the capacity of the County Offices of Education (COEs) to support SEL implementation by (a) designating one or two COEs as content leads, and (b) securing and sustaining funding for statewide and countywide communities of practice.

In June 2020, the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) invited the Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) to partner in their application to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for pandemic disaster response dollars. This opportunity came through an understanding that educators were frontline responders to the still unfolding crisis, and needed support, within their roles, in order to navigate the profound threats to student and educator wellbeing. In this work, SEL was positioned as a complement to (but not a replacement for) student mental health services. It was envisioned as an educational framework that could acknowledge the current social and emotional strains on leading, teaching, and learning, and bring educational leaders into connection, capacity-building, and collaboration as they navigated the storm. In October 2020, CalHOPE Student Support was allocated 6 million dollars in funding, originating from FEMA and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and distributed through the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA), that solidified a partnership between the health and education sectors in response to the pandemic-accelerated needs of people in schools, and thus furthering the vision for systemic and transformative SEL across California.

Insights from the gardeners: the voices of educational leaders

Despite the pace of disaster relief, it was critical to start with listening and learning from County Office of Education (COE) representatives who are charged with providing *implementation support* for the delivery of instruction and educational services, including Social and Emotional Learning, within their regions. To understand the pressing problems of practice, UC Berkeley designed an online survey in early 2021 for California COE representatives (N = 116 from 50 counties) to describe (1) the current struggles and successes of SEL in their regions, and (2) their goals for SEL in their regions. A data support team at UC Berkeley conducted a qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) by coding survey responses to consensus and then generating themes. Researchers identified some commonly reported struggles, including, (1) overwhelming and competing demands, (2) limited teacher preparation to deliver SEL, (3) purported (mis)understandings of SEL as an "add-on" rather than "means-to", and (4) the lack of coordination and systemic approach to SEL implementation. Yet, at this historic moment, there were also some recurrent successes reported, including, (1) an emerging recognition that SEL is needed, (2) an acceleration in the offering and uptake of professional learning for SEL, and (3) the expansion of mental health partners in schools. These struggles and opportunities were reflected in inspiring and ambitious goals, including, (1) helping children bounce back from disaster and improve their wellbeing, engagement, and performance, (2) building adult awareness, knowledge, and skills for SEL implementation, and (3) providing supports to adults in the form of training and forums for collaboration. Please see Appendix B for information on all of these themes, including illustrative quotes from educational leaders' survey responses.

CalHOPE student support

Informed by insights from these educational leaders, CalHOPE Student Support became a multi-stakeholder, partnered initiative – between sectors, across regions, and between system levels, intended to help California educators in the unprecedented task of bringing children back into and improving the normative routines of learning and development by strengthening capacity for SEL implementation statewide. The CalHOPE Student Support planning team included members from two COEs and a research university, partnered with 55 additional

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[3] Consistent with CASEL, we use the acronym tSEL, and acknowledge that in some settings, particularly across the state of California, the acronym T-SEL may be used as well.
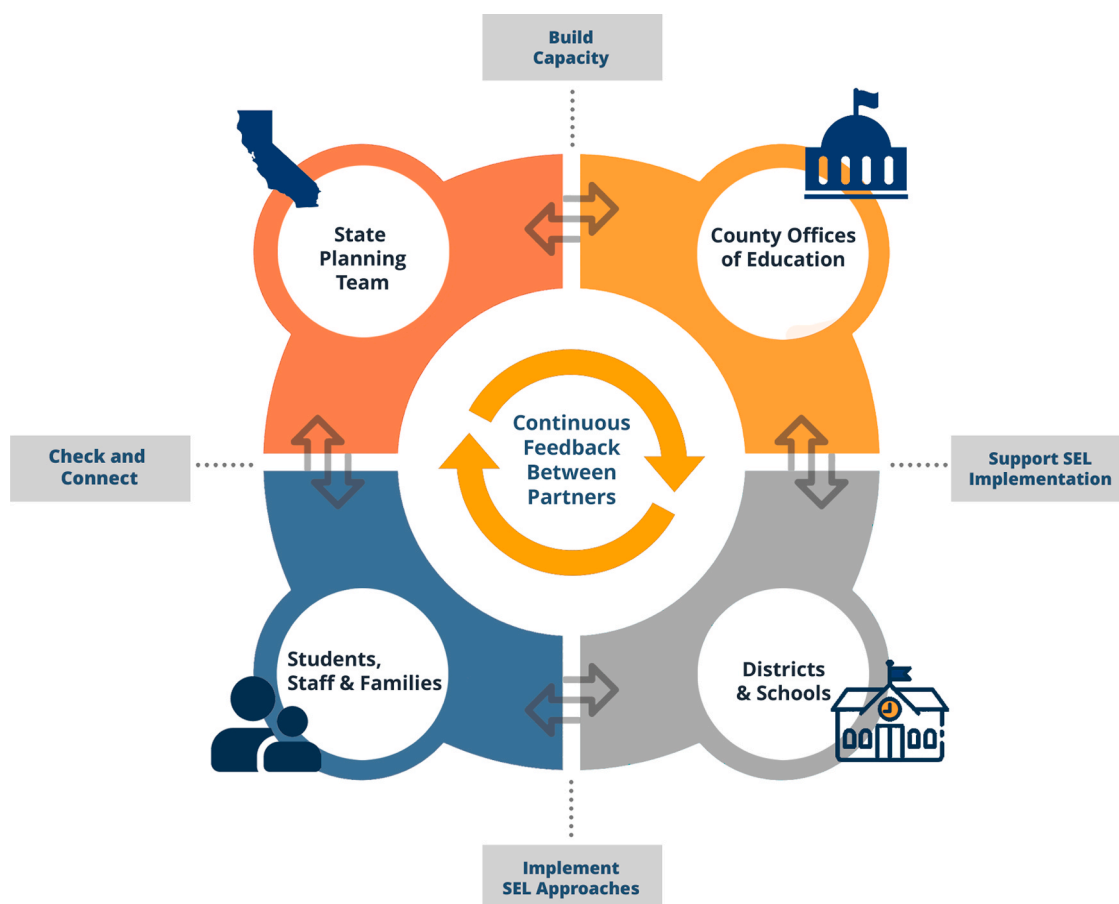
Fig. 2. Education Sector Partnerships for SEL Implementation. Copyright retained by authors[2].

county offices of education (COEs). Together, they collaborated with 27,000 administrators and 30,000 pupil services personnel, supporting over 300,000 teachers, serving over six million school students in public schools statewide. In fact, over 80% of the project funding was distributed across the state for local use. The planning team and COEs worked to augment COE capacity to *support* SEL implementation in each region, to in turn help districts and schools augment their capacity to *deliver* SEL interventions, tailored to their local communities (see Fig. 2). By "building the capacity of the capacity-builders" the planning team intended to equip all of the metaphorical "gardeners" across the state with what they needed to sow the seeds of SEL, while simultaneously recognizing that a healthy plant is one that adapts well to its niche, and the varied situations in which it finds itself.

Envisioning a thriving garden

Although a garden is typically a *planful* land use, we recognize that it is not a *uniform* land use; gardens exist in many forms, intersecting what is natural with what is desired in any given location. CalHOPE Student Support generated a shared vision for a thriving garden that celebrates the diversity of California's counties, their varied landscapes, and differing contextual goals, while aligning on a statewide process for improving SEL implementation. As a statewide planning team working on CalHOPE Student Support, we have leveraged the garden metaphor to think together about what it means to cultivate learning spaces where students thrive socially, emotionally, and academically. Our theory of change, depicted here as the Garden Model for Shifting SEL Statewide (Fig. 3), serves as both the conceptual underpinning of our work together and a guide for the practices we carry out.

When taking a birds' eye view of our garden, it is important to realize

there is no singular or particular seed that we attempt to disseminate. The "what" (e.g., principles, practices, procedures, programs, policies; Brown et al., 2017) of SEL is understood to be a local choice. Yet, the growth process is seen to have commonalities that are best advanced collectively. The seeds –whatever seeds are well suited for the environment– are intended to produce thriving people in schools; In other words, the "outcomes" are students and staff who are all *engaged, performing*, and *well*. This is symbolized in the foreground of Fig. 3 (as California's state flower, the poppy).

We acknowledge, however, that if we exclusively focus on individuals, we ignore the conditions required for thriving. *Conditions* are the circumstances affecting the way in which people learn, teach, and lead. We look to cultivate optimal conditions by improving (1) competencies, (2) climate, and (3) levers for transformation. *SEL competencies* are dispositions and skills that emerge through processes of human development. Broadly, we seek to advance the five competencies that have been popularized by CASEL (the 'CASEL 5,' i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making), as well as the five *focal constructs* recently highlighted within these competencies (i.e., identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, curiosity; see Jagers et al., 2021; CASEL, 2023). These competencies are envisioned, at the individual and collective level, as "roots" that can keep a plant healthy, even as conditions vary. For example, a strong sense of belonging, coupled with increased social awareness, could keep a person– or community– firmly engaged and supported during moments of immense turmoil. A root system is also something that can travel with a plant across environments, generalize across settings, and promote adaptability in the face of change. Although competencies are not conceptualized within other SEL initiatives as a collective condition, our multi-level initiative recognizes that one
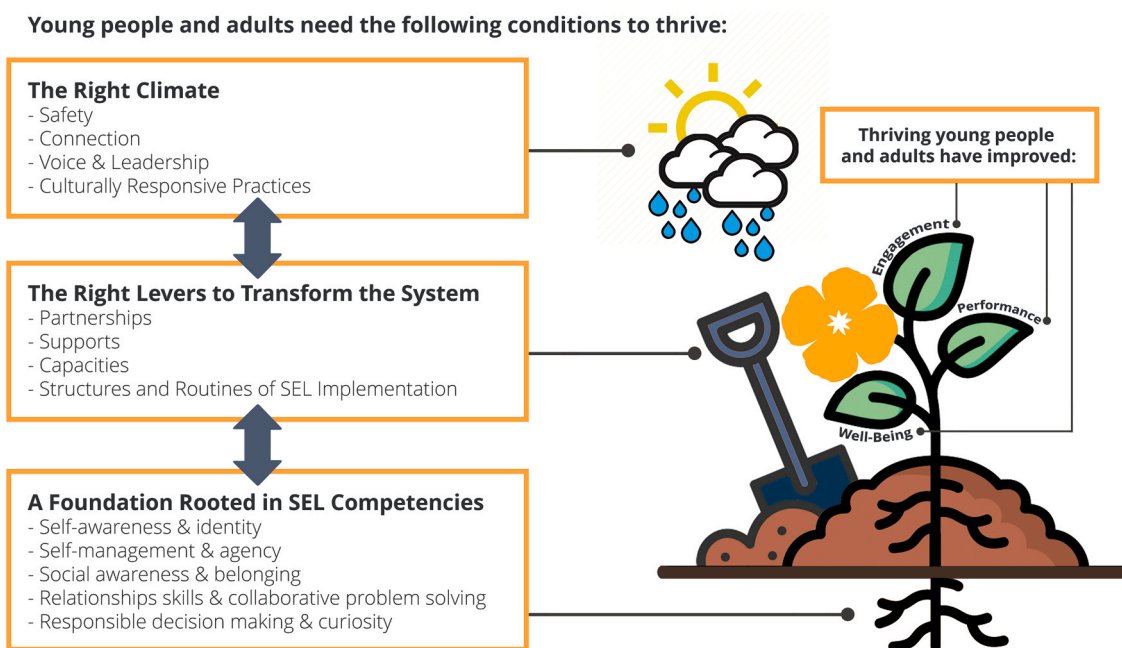
Young people and adults need the following conditions to thrive:

Fig. 3. The Garden Model for Shifting Social and Emotional Learning Statewide. Copyright retained by authors[2].

person's competencies ultimately become another person's conditions. For example, a site principal's curiosity can invite, constrain, or otherwise shape the expressions of agency among school staff. Which naturally leads to the second condition we cultivate – a *positive climate*, or the persistent patterns of school life that convey care and respect, creating norms and expectations that transcend daily experiences. Within the realm of climate, we highlight experiences of safety and connection, opportunities for voice and leadership, and culturally and linguistically responsive environments. We see these elements as both influencing and being influenced by other features shaping the garden.

Alongside competencies and climate, CalHOPE Student Support has focused on key *levers of transformation*. This is where educational leaders work hard every day, with partners, to cultivate improvement towards SEL goals. The first lever is *partnerships*. In CalHOPE, our deeply relational, co-learning approach relies heavily on developing trusting, equity-pursuing, and mutually-beneficial partnerships across sectors and regions, between levels and divisions of the education system, with families, and allied to students. Across the state, COEs and LEAs have taken up the work of partnering with intentionality and dedication. For example, one LEA shared in a "community spotlight" that they engage in "community walks," where school staff visit important community spaces, cultural centers, and connect directly with the community. Another COE shared in a "community spotlight" that they partner with youth development organizations to facilitate SEL implementation in and across the county. These high-quality partnerships generate the conditions for engagement with the second lever: supports. *Supports* include funding, resources, training, coaching, and feedback systems. For example, a COE shared that they hosted several Adult SEL study groups for county educators, involving a shared book, an app for improving emotional intelligence, and ten facilitated check-ins. Another COE shared that they provided funding and technical assistance to LEAs to "pulse" students (i.e., collect and summarize responses to very brief survey probes) and help adults make meaning and take action based on the student data. The presence of these supports build the third lever: capacity. *Capacities* are the beliefs, knowledge, skills, and sense of efficacy that are required to do something differently. These partnerships, supports, and capacities are envisioned to enable the *routines and structures* needed for systemic SEL implementation (e.g., SEL leadership team, shared vision, needs assessments, plans and goals, communication, instruction or programs, continuum of supports, data based

reflection and improvement). The routines and structures of systemic SEL can exist at all levels of the K-12 education system and in the greater community. Within CalHOPE, each county, district, and school decides where to target their SEL improvement efforts, and uses the levers to cultivate growth. An aligned and comprehensive feedback system, using the *Berkeley Assessment of Social and Emotional Learning* (BASEL; Shapiro et al., 2022), functions as a "smart sensor" in the garden, intended to help facilitate needs assessment, prioritization, planning, and monitoring progress.

Harmonizing essential elements into a system of support for continuous improvement

In pursuing these goals, we considered the roles of "essential elements" – which in themselves represent complex systems: the distillation system (metaphorically, sunlight), the implementation system (metaphorically, water), the community and contexts (metaphorically, air), and the delivery system (metaphorically, glucose), each described below (Wandersman et al., 2008) and depicted in Fig. 4. The CalHOPE *distillation system* ("sunlight") converts scientific discoveries (like those presented in scholarly journals) into strategies that could be applied directly to educator practice. The scientific synthesizing and translating process results in tools, training, technical assistance, and feedback loops that facilitate the delivery of evidence-informed SEL (Wandersman et al., 2012). The CalHOPE distillation system was initially led by UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center (GGSC), whose mission is to share science-based insights for a meaningful life. The GGSC's Greater Good in Education (GGIE) team, in partnership with field experts, created six learning modules for facilitators to use in the professional learning opportunities they hosted. These modules included information on the science of SEL and strategies for 1) supporting educators' social and emotional well-being, 2) cultivating safety and belonging in classrooms and schools, 3) addressing trauma, 4) understanding racial equity, 5) integrating SEL into the academic curriculum, and 5) bolstering family and community engagement. GGIE also made their *Basics of SEL* self-paced mini-course available to all of California's educators. Through these resources, GGIE shined light on promising research-based ideas to improve SEL practice.

The CalHOPE *implementation support system* ("water") expanded the capacity of COEs to support SEL implementation. Although the *state*
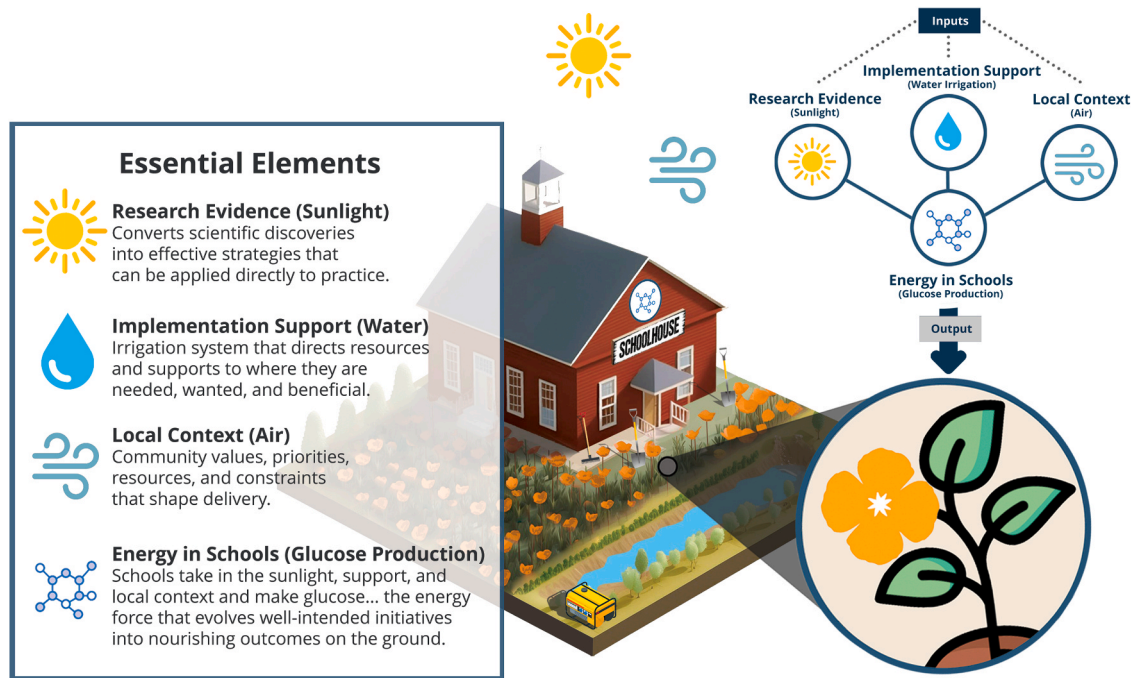
Fig. 4. Harmonizing "Essential Elements" into a System of Support for Continuous Improvement.. Copyright retained by authors[2].

typically establishes educational policy, regulations, and funding in California, 1000 + locally controlled school districts are responsible for the delivery of instruction. Sitting adjacent to these functions, 58 *County Offices of Education* (COEs) provide regional implementation support to the districts and schools. In CalHOPE Student Support, COEs can be reliable conduits of information and facilitators of practice improvement. District interaction with COEs is voluntary in California, and partnerships need to be forged. When optimized, COEs play an essential irrigation role, building metaphorical "tubes and pumps" to direct resources and supports to where they are most needed, wanted, and beneficial.

The cornerstone of the CalHOPE effort to augment COE capacity ("build capacity of the capacity builders") are monthly statewide SEL *Community of Practice* (CP) meetings, in which COE representatives learn with and from each other on topics related to SEL implementation. The CP meetings regularly feature time to connect, reflect, discuss, and spotlight, with the intention to (1) support a network of COEs to consider ideas, swap resources, and build collective capacity, (2) build a shared understanding of SEL and implementation among COEs, (3) model structures and turn key activities that COEs could use in the *regional* SEL CP meetings that they facilitate between statewide CP meetings, and (4) motivate COE effort through successful examples of SEL implementation in educational environments. Between monthly statewide CP meetings, weekly drop-in office hours were also held for technical assistance. Office hours tended to be with smaller groups of people – and more free-flowing. COE representatives asked and answered questions related to the day to day activities of supporting implementation. This built an irrigation system connecting all regions of California to a reservoir of SEL implementation support.

The CalHOPE *delivery system* ("glucose") carries out the activities necessary to deliver high quality SEL. In California, the responsibilities of the delivery system are most frequently carried out by *Local Education Agencies* (LEAs) – public authorities that administratively control local public elementary and secondary schools – most often school districts and independent charter schools. The local districts and schools are directly responsible for a student's growth. Metaphorically, schools take in the aforementioned sunlight (i.e., information), water (i.e., implementation support), and local air (i.e., community values, resources, and

constraints) to make glucose – the energy force that evolves a well-intended initiative into robust implementation and nourishing outcomes on the ground. Glucose, whether naturally occurring or created, represents the significant, intentional efforts that occur every day – even under suboptimal conditions (e.g., shade, drought, smog) – exemplified by the principal who clears staff meeting time to make space for SEL, the parent who generously brings their cultural wealth into school buildings, the teacher who revisits lesson plans to ensure SEL integration into academics, the co-worker who knows your fight song and will sing it with you, and the counselor who looks upstream from their overwhelming caseload to work on school-wide approaches that promote wellbeing. These essential elements exist separately and together. Placed in a delicate, interactive balance, they can be aligned and optimized for garden growth.

The original CalHOPE Student Support project was renewed in August 2021 for a second allocation of six million dollars in federal funding. By this time, nearly 6000 educational leaders across the state had participated in a CalHOPE Student Support statewide or regional SEL CP meeting, with website visits to the Greater Good in Education collection of evidence-informed SEL practices increasing in California by 110%, relative to other highly populated states (e.g., 55% in IL, 35% in NY, 29% in TX), and the United States overall (36%). CalHOPE Student Support success was subsequently recognized with a $45 million investment by the state, through the California Department of Health Care Services, that would enable the partnered work between healthcare and education to continue and deepen through June 2024.

Our garden's yield

In the summer of 2022, 18 months after the launch of CalHOPE Student Support, we administered another survey to COE representatives across the state ($N = 113$ from 56 counties). COE representatives again answered: 1) What successes are you having with Social and Emotional Learning? 2) What struggles are you having with Social and Emotional Learning? Following the same qualitative process as described above, the researchers noted that COE representatives reported successes in their regions that included, (1) understanding the importance of SEL, but now also having resources for large-scale SEL

implementation, (2) observing strong collaborative communities with increased engagement in professional learning, and (3) practice moving beyond an exclusive focus on the implementation of student-level programs, to transforming structures and routines that include all members of the school community. New and ongoing struggles, included (1) concerns about mistrust across the political spectrum, (2) initiative fatigue in response to pandemic accelerated needs, and (3) concerns about maintaining progress. See Appendix C for further explanation of these themes and corresponding illustrative quotes.

Lessons learned: reflections from some gardeners

In sowing the seeds of SEL, we aspire to create a garden that is both a place of collaborative cultivation and of quiet reflection. Given these dual aims, we reflect, here, on the earliest phases of CalHOPE Student Support to explicate lessons learned by the CalHOPE planning team. We present key considerations and concrete questions to "dig into" for other educational leaders looking to grow and sustain a large scale, multi-level, implementation of systemic SEL.

Lesson 1: build capacity for SEL, but also build capacity for change-making

When building capacity for statewide SEL, the planning team, and subsequently the participating COE representatives, put considerable effort into aligning on the "why"– the rationale for implementing SEL at every level (e.g., statewide, countywide, schoolwide, etc.). Clarity on our motivations was very important for multi-stakeholder engagement in a voluntary initiative, and the strong vision and values alignment brought much needed coherence to guide such a large-scale undertaking. After motivation, the core of our early SEL capacity building was promoting a shared understanding of SEL, sometimes referred to as the "what". This was essential for the alignment of our communications.

Yet, building SEL capacity was ultimately insufficient to truly advance our goals for systemic SEL implementation statewide. Beyond building SEL specific capacity, we realized we needed a second focus on building general capacity for change-making (Shapiro et al., 2015). To this end, in October 2021, The Center for Implementation (TCI), became part of the distillation system (e.g., translating research from the field of implementation science into resources for implementation practice) and the implementation support system (e.g., providing training and technical assistance to the state team and county office representatives to help identify, plan, and enact strategies to achieve desired benefits in a sustainable and equitable way – honoring the experiences, strengths, and concerns of the different people involved at various system levels). Therefore, CalHOPE Student Support has benefited from the synthesis and translation of scientific knowledge, becoming implementation supports, on *both* SEL and on *implementation* (i.e., the process of putting a decision or plan into effect) in order to advance our goals for SEL implementation.

Guiding Questions for Education Leaders to Consider:

- What is our why?
- What partners and supports do we need to build capacity for SEL implementation?

Lesson 2: meet people where they are and differentiate support accordingly

The counties, districts, and schools participating in CalHOPE Student Support varied considerably in their pre-existing capacity and structures for SEL implementation. It was vital to meet people–COEs, districts, schools, staff, and students–wherever they were starting from. We needed to seek understanding about the varied starting points, and to honor local contexts and lived experiences when charting a path forward. For example, our rural COEs serve communities may have limited access to infrastructure or resources (e.g. essential services, jobs, cultural or human capital, etc.), and have different considerations for

building scalable solutions than our urban centers. Yet, perhaps relatedly, our rural COEs had different pulls toward partnerships, and were some of the earliest adopters of those levers for change. It is important to explore strengths and opportunities, as well as needs, when designing for change.

Different COEs, districts, and schools, also had different goals and priorities, and different potentials for the pace of change. We were pushed to be realistic about the feasible pace of change. More fundamentally, we realized we should not aspire to all arrive simultaneously at a common destination, but rather to all engage in the pursuit of improvement together. Increasingly, in response to feedback we received, we have allocated time in our monthly CPs for COE representatives to "choose your own adventure," where representatives self-select into networking spaces based on their needs, to allow for more differentiated, tailored support. Importantly, we also learned that educators have a predisposition to rely heavily on education strategies in the change process. In other words, we try to solve most implementation objectives with professional development. While teaching (e.g., expanding knowledge and awareness) is the tool we are most familiar with as educators, we realized we need to meet people where they are, hear what they actually need, and provide more diverse, responsive, and adaptive supports to continuously improve SEL implementation.

Guiding Questions for Education Leaders to Consider:

- Where are our starting points?
- What are realistic and feasible goals?
- What tailored implementation supports do we need?

Lesson 3: build relationships and navigate turnover

To act at the pace of disaster response, the work had to come together quickly. Making fast-paced collaborative decisions within and between bureaucratic institutions, while navigating uncertainty and shifting priorities, made trust and reliance on each other a necessity. We learned it is important to give people time to explore and learn– even amidst immense stress and uncertainty– and to build relationships needed for sustained engagement and successful implementation. We did this deliberately, by establishing regular opportunities for educators within the project to network, connect, collaborate, reflect on challenges and successes, and build authentic community. For example, at every statewide Community of Practice meeting, there is standing time to be with each other, through connection questions, get-to-know-you activities, dialogue, and discussion. Additionally, weekly office hours allow for more informal connections, resource-sharing, and relationship building opportunities. At times, however, we forgot to pause to do similar work among the planning team. When possible, we began gathering in-person, twice each year, to break bread together embracing a fuller version of our humanity. When we did, the investment of time to foster relationships always paid off. Indeed, relationships are at the root of every activity, resource, and outcome connected to this project.

Since there has been turnover among those participating in the project, building relationships on an ongoing basis has meant relying on people who have been involved since its inception, and ensuring on-ramps and scaffolds for those who are newly contributing. Although "churn" is typically described as an impediment to implementation and improvement (Forman et al., 2009), in our multi-level, statewide initiative, we were also able to see talented teachers become coaches, SEL coordinators promoted to administrators, and personnel move between districts. From this vantage point, we saw opportunities to take the work in different directions, expand and deepen, and to cross pollinate ideas and strategies. Churn was yet another way to sow the seeds! During a winter virus surge, we also witnessed county office employees become, or we ourselves became, temporary substitute classroom teachers– offering perspective and support that enabled stronger empathic connections and a sense that we are all in this together.

Guiding Questions for Education Leaders to Consider:

- How are we showing up with and for each other?
- How does our garden rejuvenate and how does it fit in the broader landscape?

Lesson 4: embed SEL approaches within SEL implementation

Social emotional learning is not transactional work, and *the way* we show up to engage in the work of building systems for SEL implementation should reflect that. The process of embedding authentic SEL processes into the work of SEL implementation is not linear nor ad hoc; it is deeply integrated and threaded throughout the acts and experience of change making. In our earliest days, we started with digging into foundational knowledge such as the *why* of SEL, how people learn, the role of emotions and the importance of adult protective relationships to create the conditions for social, emotional, and academic learning. While doing so, we made intentional efforts to explicitly integrate the three SEL signature practices (i.e., welcoming activity, engaging strategies, optimistic closure; CASEL, 2019b) into each CP meeting, and designed activities to cultivate SEL competencies such as curiosity, collaborative problem solving, and agency. We need to continuously build the climate in which we want to situate and do our work, where we invite our diverse identities, and nurture a sense of belonging. Our "come as you are" community norms guide our compassionate collective stance toward each other. We recognize that each of us, in our pursuit of change, relies on our social and emotional competencies and a positive climate in order to engage, perform, and be well. If we wish to inspire and support a thriving garden, we recognize the imperative to cultivate these conditions for our gardeners – the change makers, as well as through and in our acts of gardening.

Guiding Questions for Education Leaders to Consider:

- What do educational leaders need to fully engage, perform, and be well?
- How can we infuse SEL processes into the work of SEL implementation?

Lesson 5: emphasize equity

Centering equity in SEL work is essential and consequential to actualizing the full promise of *transformative* practice. Given the unique needs of individual, diverse communities, dynamic cultural contexts, and shifting landscapes in California, it's critical that SEL and equity be braided together to support school communities. In building capacity for SEL leadership and implementation, incorporating an equity lens was key to ensuring that all voices are engaged. Intentional equity-design centers those who are farthest away from access and power. What this looks like in practice is a regular place holder that elevates equity considerations and serves as a reminder that SEL and equity are not siloed efforts. For example, every one of our statewide CPs now starts with the following *equity pulse check*, which we share here for others to engage with as well.

Guiding Questions for Education Leaders to Consider:

- Have we considered people's needs, and are we meeting them where they are? (e.g., is the SEL approach the right one? Are they ready? Are we adapting to meet their needs?)
- Have we considered who is included, who is not included, and why?
- Have we considered whether people are involved the way they want to be involved, and how they benefit from involvement?
- Have we considered the values, beliefs, and biases people bring to the table?
- Have we considered trust, power, and what shapes these dynamics (e.g., history, society, policy, etc.)?

- Have we considered whether you are "implementing with" or "intervening on"?
- Have we considered who is making decisions, and who benefits and who loses when decisions are being made?

Conclusion

We have learned so much from our collective efforts to advance SEL statewide in California. From years of groundwork, and under the most unexpected confluence of societal conditions, we together grew a beautiful, imperfect, diverse, and fast sprouting garden. We harmonized essential elements across our systems for knowledge mobilization, implementation support, and delivery, and focused on four key levers of transformation (i.e., partnerships, supports, capacities, and the routines and structures of systemic implementation) between and within each level of our education system. It is clear that we have had significant successes, due in no small part to the effort of gardeners across the system. Specifically, SEL representatives from County Offices of Education report our successes to include (1) understanding the importance of SEL and having resources for large-scale SEL implementation, (2) observing strong collaborative communities with increased engagement in professional learning, and (3) moving beyond an exclusive focus on the implementation of student-level programs, to transforming structures and routines that include all members of the school community. As we continue to progress CalHOPE Student Support, we also recognize we have much work left to do, including (1) forging trust across the political spectrum, (2) aligning allied initiatives, and (3) building infrastructure for sustained progress. As we "sow the seeds" of SEL across California – toward a collective vision for an education system that creates the conditions for thriving – we have benefited from the insights of education leaders who have been catalysts for transforming the landscape. In turn, we hope educational leaders reading this find our lessons learned helpful in their work to advance SEL in their regions.

Impact statement

This article is for educational leaders who are curious about efforts to align and support diverse Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) initiatives across a large geographic region through a shared process of improvement and a shared vision for thriving. First, we describe the historic developments that created opportunities for co-learning and improvement of SEL on a statewide scale. Then, we describe the infrastructure, activities, experiences, and lessons learned from our work in California. We illuminate our "why" as well as some of the complexities and synergies of statewide efforts. Ultimately, CalHOPE Student Support illustrates a regional approach to SEL implementation.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

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