

# PREFACE

## *To Superintendents and District/Building Administrators*

**W**hile much of this book is dedicated to the individuals who are considered Social Emotional Learning (SEL) coaches or lead implementers, leaders of districts are a vitally important part of any system change effort. Your support through time, budget, and advocating for the importance of developing social and emotional competencies is crucial. SEL has been around for over 25 years. Its importance in developing youth who can build relationships, make informed decisions, and use problem-solving skills has been validated through countless research articles and publications. These evidence-based outcomes of the benefits for students and adults to have social and emotional competencies help to produce productive citizens.

A recent study found that there have been significant effects on youth well-being after the pandemic. Speaking to educators nationwide, they have talked about not only the academic lag that some students have experienced but also their social and emotional competencies. This looks like more fighting, more disconnection from school and classmates, stress reactions, referrals to the counselor, and absenteeism. While it will be some time before we get more comprehensive data on the effects of the pandemic, school leaders are reporting the changes they see from before March 2020 until now. The August 2021 report “How Has the Pandemic Affected Students’ Social-Emotional Well-Being? A Review of the Evidence to Date” found the following:

- A significant portion of young people, likely 30–40%, have experienced negative impacts on their mental or social-emotional health during the pandemic.
- Students who learned remotely for long periods of time and historically marginalized students were more likely to experience these negative effects.
- Rates of anxiety and attempted suicides, already on the rise pre-pandemic, appear to have increased among all students, especially among girls.

- While some students fared well initially or even fared better when learning remotely than they did in person before the pandemic, these positive effects did not last. Negative effects for students increased over time.
- Schools and districts, especially in rural areas without a strong social service infrastructure, lacked systems to track student well-being or strategies to address and improve it (Hamilton et al., 2021, p. 6).

You may be aware of why SEL is important and how it can mediate some of the effects of social isolation and the stress of the pandemic. But I would like to invite you to consider how funding an SEL coach or lead implementer can magnify your efforts.

## WHY AN SEL COACH?

The Social Emotional Learning coach is a relatively new position. There are districts across the country that have begun to find it necessary to create this position to help organize the people, resources, and tasks that must take place for SEL implementation.

SEL coaches can come from a variety of places within the system. They can be school counselors, psychologists, teachers, administrators, social workers, and the like. They can have the role of SEL exclusively or as a part of another role. It does not necessarily matter what role they have been in previously. What matters is the skill sets that they have or can develop in the service of this work. One of those things is the ability to demonstrate these competencies in difficult and demanding settings.

Schools need SEL coaches or lead implementers to effectively support the heavy lift of systems change. Individuals with the expertise and training can help to solve the unique challenges that SEL implementation creates in individual systems. School leaders start with good intentions but lack the time, resources, and expertise to create system change without someone who can provide them with the support to implement schoolwide SEL. Therefore, an SEL coach can be a game changer.

An SEL coach can help administrators during the implementation process. “Principals experience substantial job-related stress, yet they often lack the guidance and resources necessary to develop their own social and emotional competencies (SECs) that could help them respond appropriately. A large proportion of principals feel that they lack the requisite skills to effectively lead their schools, and high turnover rates create a significant financial and operational burden” (Mahfouz et al., 2019, p. 3). In many communities, understanding how to select and integrate intentional supports that help staff deal with the uncertainty of starting something new and complex is a barrier to SEL implementation. The skills that educational stakeholders need to effectively manage an SEL implementation are not currently

taught in many preservice or higher education training programs. Effective SEL coaches should have the ability to lead, have strong communication skills, provide data support, conduct professional development and training for other adults, coach throughout the system, and team with educational stakeholders and community members. The SEL coach can be the lever to transform an idea into an action plan and goals into outcomes.

SEL coaches focus on creating a productive environment. This person needs to keep many different things in mind while providing coaching. They are monitoring the entire system to determine the focus of their practice. An SEL coach may be working with the administration to create equitable discipline procedures. They may work with individual teachers to integrate Social Emotional Learning curriculum into the teaching day. The SEL coach may do observations for students to try and determine the antecedent of a behavior. The SEL coach may work with parents to educate them on the skills that are being taught at school so they may have a common language at home. The SEL coach may work with the bus drivers to give them strategies they can use to communicate with students that provide a good entry to school. We choose to implement social and emotional learning to impact student outcomes. But students learn best when they see these competencies practiced and modeled by the adults around them. And that is where the SEL coach can make a huge difference in promoting, teaching, leading, communicating, and supporting all educational stakeholders in demonstrating these valuable skills.

## **WHO CAN BE AN SEL COACH? QUALIFICATIONS**

SEL coach skill sets include the ability to collaborate and work together for a common good—the ability to have difficult conversations, which means to come up with multiple solutions to problems, reflect on the perspectives of others, focus on the big picture, and not get stuck on the small stuff. This will require the ability to mediate or compromise when stuck on a specific issue. And this may also involve knowing when to get the administration to the table to figure out really challenging situations. Of course, being able to problem-solve will be necessary. Problem-solving includes defining the problem, determining the cause of the problem, creating and prioritizing solutions and alternatives, and then implementing the best probable solution. SEL coaches need to be able to manage their time well. And this includes scheduling and managing time for self and others. Power struggles can occur in the school environment. The coach will need to be adept at dealing with them by listening and validating the experiences of others. Another quality is to be a flexible thinker. This is the ability to shift thinking or attention in response to the unexpected or new, such as a new mandate or district focus that may add complications to their current work with SEL. In essence, the ideal SEL coach has the willingness and capacity to embody and model SEL skills with other educational stakeholders.

## Potential Job Description

The ideal candidate's professional background includes the following:

1. Time in the classroom: teaching, subbing, working as paraprofessional in desired grade level: elementary, middle, and high
2. Education in school counseling, mental health/community counseling, special education, school psychology, social work, instructional coaching, behavior support
3. Previous exposure to SEL, MTSS, PBIS, or RTI: understands the basics of system change
4. Professional growth habits: new certification, trainings, and continued pursuit of knowledge
5. Experience delivering and creating professional development
6. Previous experience with SEL curriculum and competencies

## How Can Leadership Assist in the Development of SEL Coaches in the System?

While hiring an SEL coach will help your school community build and strengthen their SEL foundation, it is important to remember that there are some additional elements to make this position successful. To be successful, their relationship with your school system must start positively. There are a few essential components that should be in place to give SEL coaches the foundation to start their work. Initially, coaches need an induction or onboarding process, an action plan, and professional development.

### *Induction/Onboarding Process*

The first thing that SEL coaches need is an induction or onboarding process. Induction programs are comprehensive systems of support that help bridge the preservice to service development of beginning educators. Induction programs address both the practical needs of beginning coaches (who, what, when, and why) and nurture coach professional development (the how). Onboarding programs are important for the SEL leader, and the school community. This is also an ideal time to observe the school community and begin building positive relationships with the people in the system. During the onboarding process, the SEL coach will begin building relationships with teachers and principals. They will also identify key members of the school community, especially those who could support implementation. This includes implementation leaders, other coaches, and resource managers. Who is critical to the position's success? Who will be a strong partner? The SEL coach will need to meet those individuals quickly and establish a positive rapport. The SEL coach will also benefit from understanding the particular practices within your specific school environment.

## *Creating an Action Plan*

An action plan will need to be determined by school leadership for the SEL coach to begin their new learning. These are some introductory steps for the first few weeks of school.

### **SAMPLE: Action Plan**

- Introductions to key building leadership
- A brief overview of the hierarchical structure of your school or district
- Understand previous experience with SEL: Ask about positive and negative and what worked and didn't work
- Give information to the SEL coach about the history and need for the SEL coach role
- Establish the coach role with the school or district: include establishing dos and don'ts for the role
- Develop a document for the role of coaches for dissemination to faculty
- Set expectations for the SEL coach role including primary and secondary roles and assignments
  - Primary assignments: Leader of implementation at school level, training, coaching, professional development, data support, team member, communicator
  - Secondary assignments include meetings, webpage, parent night organization, training, engagement, community outreach, resource manager
- Set up a meeting with principals
  - Prepare with questions and discussion topics
  - Questions about role
  - Topics could include
    - Team structure
    - Meeting schedule
    - Office space/work schedule
    - Staff PD/introduction
    - Action plan (for both the year and first few weeks)

### *Professional Development for the SEL Coach*

A continued emphasis on growing skill sets for the SEL coach will provide educators with tools to grow and expand their skills. Additional training is extremely beneficial for all new staff. Training should be focused on providing meaningful experiences for the SEL coach. Professional development can include conferences, professional speakers, or authors related to a specific area of education and SEL.

#### **SAMPLE: Training and Resources for SEL Coach Role**

- Invest in additional technical training and resources/Build coach capacity
- Additional technical training for the coach role
  - Computer systems: internal
  - Excel
  - OneNote, Google Docs, or other shared data collection
  - Website creation/maintenance
- Data collection and analysis
- Communication skills
- How to lead meetings and create agendas
- Resources
  - Access to articles, websites, internet
  - Books
  - Outside trainings
- Make forms consistent for all coaches
  - Such as:
    - Inventory of programs and initiatives
    - Action planning
    - Intervention tracking form
    - Task list
    - Tiered fidelity inventory

## SAMPLE: Agenda for Two-Day Training for Coaches at Beginning of Year

- Day 1:
  - Introductions and Icebreakers
  - Discussion: Things I am looking forward to in this role; questions or concerns I have about the role
  - Job description
  - Assign mentors (if available)
  - Create norms for meetings
  - Highlights of last year
  - Strategies for coaching
- Day 2:
  - Tiered fidelity inventory
  - Year at a glance
  - Organizing a typical day
  - Specific content training
  - Using data for effectiveness and efficiency
  - Self-care strategies

### Training Schedule (example)

#### *Training for SEL Coach: Phase One*

DATE	TRAINING	DELIVERED BY	RESOURCES	AREA OF FOCUS

*(Continued)*

