

Social and Emotional Learning Assessment Guidance

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Purposes and Definitions of Social and Emotional Learning Assessment

Purpose of Assessment in Education

“The primary goal of classroom assessment, whether for formative, interim, or summative purposes, is to support student learning.”¹

When educators are purposeful in implementing evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs and practices, research has demonstrated that a variety of school and student outcomes improve such as school climate, behavior and engagement². To better understand how district, school, and classroom practices support the social and emotional development of all students, it is important to assess both SEL practices and outcomes. In this guide, we discuss the purpose of SEL assessment as well as the types of SEL assessment such as outcome and process-based assessments.

The primary reason to assess SEL should be to inform practice, with an intentional focus on 1) understanding students’ development of social and emotional competencies and 2) improving SEL-related instruction and programming. Use this assessment guide in combination with the SEL District Implementation and Professional Development Guidance and the SEL Competencies and Benchmarks, which we developed to help educators support students in developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors they need to be successful as students and adults. SEL competencies are important for student success in school, work and life,³ so it is critical that educators weave these competencies into the curriculum with the goal of being more intentional in addressing the needs of the whole child⁴. Similar to other formative assessments in educational settings, SEL assessments are intended to inform decision-making at the classroom, school and school district levels. In other words, you can use assessments of social and emotional knowledge, skills and abilities to understand the development of individual students and you can aggregate the resulting data at the classroom, school and district level for continuous improvement, research and evaluation. Assessment of SEL is best used for formative purposes such as information gathering and communication, not for summative or high-stakes decisions such as student placement and disciplinary referrals.

¹ Klinger, D.A., McDivitt, P.R., Howard, B.B., Munoz, M.A., Rogers, W.T., & Wylie, E.C. (2015). [The Classroom Assessment Standards for PreK-12 Teachers](#). Kindle Direct Press.

² Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432.; Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D’Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of educational research*, 83(3), 357-385.

³ Jones, D. E., Greenberg, M., & Crowley, M. (2015). [Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness](#). *American Journal of Public Health*, 105, 2283–2290.

Retrieved from; Taylor, E. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). [Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects](#). *Child Development*, 88(4), 1156–1171.

⁴ Yoder, N. (2014). [Teaching the whole child: Instructional practices that support social-emotional learning in three teacher evaluation frameworks](#). Washington, DC: Center on Great Teachers and Leaders.

SEL assessments can serve a variety of purposes for stakeholders at all levels of the education system. For example:

- **District leaders** can examine districtwide data to find trends in SEL implementation and outcomes, including identifying differences across schools and student groups. District leaders may also examine school-level SEL data to reflect on the effectiveness of their SEL-related supports to schools and make decisions about where to invest additional resources.
- **School leaders** can use school-level data from SEL assessments to:
 - 1) Identify trends in student social and emotional competencies across the school to determine if SEL-related efforts within the school are working.
 - 2) Determine if there are disparities in the types of supports that subgroups of students receive for their social and emotional development.
 - 3) Understand the degree to which teachers are implementing SEL practices in the ways that they are intended. School-level data are most useful when they are collected in a systematic way.
- **Teachers** can use data from SEL assessments for multiple purposes within the classroom. For example, teachers may use a performance-based assessment to determine how well their students use self-regulation skill or they may use a communication skills rubric to provide feedback to students during a presentation. In each case, teachers should use these assessments formatively to improve the classroom experience for all students, not as a mechanism to identify or diagnose students.

Data Informed Decision-Making

SEL assessment should be used within a cycle of continuous improvement. Inherent in any cycle of improvement is data-informed decision making, which is moving the organization toward a data-driven system. In its “A Culture of Evidence”⁵ series, Educational Testing Service (ETS) described two final steps in this process of creating an evidence-based system of assessment and improvement in the assessment of student learning outcomes in higher education. In the context of K-12 education, these include:

1. Addressing needed changes in the activities of teaching and learning to ensure student learning success and school success.
2. Continually developing a sustained effort over time and expand efforts into new areas of interest to ensure a culture of evidence.

To ensure ongoing success, the “Culture of Evidence” series also encourages using the steps that follow:

1. Communicate and share results of assessments and related analyses with appropriate stakeholders about what district’s goals were determined to be important and accessible, the tools used to assess the goals and the results of the assessments.
2. Use the district and school’s internal decision-making processes to determine the meaning of the successes and the shortfalls. Identify the steps necessary to address the deficiencies and to support successes.

⁵ Millett, C.M., Payne, D.G., Dwyer, C.A., Stickler, L.M., & Alexiou, J.J. (2008). [A culture of evidence: An evidence-centered approach to accountability for student learning outcomes](#). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

3. District and school leaders should commit to using the most appropriate tools for the next round of assessment so they it can determine whether any changes or initiatives have produced the desired results.

As you move through this guidance, keep these steps in mind as you define the purpose of the assessment and as you plan, prepare and implement the SEL assessment.

Types of Assessments and Special Considerations

There are generally two broad categories of SEL assessment – outcome measures and process measures.

- **Outcomes** – Outcome measures look at the intended goals of an effort. For your SEL efforts, outcome data might include student social and emotional skills, which can be measured through self-report, teacher report, family report or performance of tasks. In addition, SEL can be inferred or supplemented through existing data such as attendance, GPA, behavior incidents, suspensions, and expulsions. Outcomes may also be at the school level. For example, outcomes may include student, staff, and family perceptions of school climate.
- **Process** – Process measures look at the practices that were implemented during the effort. Collecting these types of data help you understand what is happening in schools and classrooms and identify opportunities for improvement. This includes measurement of practice, which can be done through observations, self-reports of practices, teacher logs or student reports of teacher practice.

In the following section, we describe different types of outcome and process data that can be used to measure SEL and related efforts. Each of these types of assessments can be used for many purposes which we describe in the "Broad Categories of Purposes" section of this document. Assessments can also be reported at different levels – the district, school, classroom and individual level, which is described in the "Levels of Reporting" section of this document. For a more detailed review of SEL assessment, [read the Learning Policy Institute's "Encouraging Social and Emotional Learning in the Context of New Accountability."](#)

Outcomes

You (school districts or schools) can use outcome measures to assess the competencies, attitudes and perceptions that you hope to improve as a result of SEL-related efforts. You can use outcome measure data to make decisions about the types of supports that are needed, monitor progress along the way and make course corrections as needed. Assessments specifically designed to measure SEL-related outcomes are the best source of outcome data for SEL efforts. Other data sources can also provide helpful indicators of success.

Student Social and Emotional Competencies, Attitudes and Perceptions of Self

Most SEL programs and practices aim to improve a variety of social and emotional competencies, attitudes and perceptions. Typically, an SEL effort will have targeted outcomes that the program or practice is attempting to influence, including one or more social and emotional competencies. Many SEL efforts also attempt to influence student behaviors such as student engagement or student-teacher relationships, attitudes (e.g., connection to school), or self-perception such as believing in one's own abilities (e.g., growth mindset). Learn more about influencing targeted outcomes in the SEL Implementation Guidance document. Academic tasks performed by students sometimes include social and emotional competencies. When this occurs, teachers may want to assess student social and emotional competencies while the student engages in the academic task. For example, a

teacher could assess a student’s communication skills during group discussions. When selecting an assessment of SEL outcome measures, it is important to align the assessment with the targeted skill or competency. Measuring student social and emotional competencies can be done through questionnaires, observations, performance assessments, reports, and interviews and focus groups as detailed in the “Methods SEL Assessments” section.

School Climate

To effectively support students academically, socially and emotionally, students should learn in a safe, supportive environments. School climate measures typically assess the degree to which students, staff and families perceive the school environment as being physically and emotionally safe, supportive of positive relationships as well as an environment where they see both evidence of strong student connectedness to school and where there are opportunities for rigorous teaching and learning, among other topics. Given the relationship between school climate and SEL⁶, measures of school climate provide insights into how SEL efforts are working within schools and districts. If students are effectively engaged in SEL practices, they may be more likely to be engaged in school and perceive positive school climates. Assessments of school climate are usually conducted through a survey questionnaire.

Other Data Sources

Schools and districts may already collect a variety of data that can be used as proxy measures for students’ social and emotional development such as grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores, attendance, disciplinary rates, behavior incident reports and graduation rates⁷. These other measures, although they do not explicitly evaluate SEL competencies, can provide insight about how students use their social and emotional skills. For example, GPA provides some understanding about the degree to which students put effort into school and persevere with difficult or challenging tasks.

Process

Process measures are used to understand if and how well the identified practices, programs and interventions are being implemented at a district or school. Process measures are important to include within cycles of continuous improvement as they help to determine:

1. If practices are being implemented at all.
2. The degree to which they are being implemented.
3. The relationship between practices and outcomes.

⁶ Devaney, E., & Berg, J. (2016). [Creating healthy schools: Ten key ideas for the social and emotional learning and school climate community](#). Washington DC: American Institutes for Research.

⁷ Melnick, H., Cook-Harvey, C. M., Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). [Encouraging social and emotional learning in the context of new accountability](#). Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

4. If practices need to be adapted or modified to meet the needs of all students.
5. If additional supports are needed for teachers to implement the practices fully.

To assess SEL efforts for continuous improvement, schools and districts may want to collect multiple types of process measures, including teaching practices and program fidelity, adult competencies, and school and district practices⁸.

Teaching Practices and Program Fidelity

Educators can take four approaches to implement SEL within learning environments, including:

1. Direct instruction on social and emotional skills.
2. Integration of SEL with academic content.
3. General teaching practices that support students' social and emotional competencies.
4. Schoolwide systems to support SEL⁹.

These four approaches can occur through general teaching practices or through pre-packaged SEL programs¹⁰. It is important to understand the degree to which implementation of programs and/or teacher practices is executed as intended, because research demonstrates that high-quality implementation is necessary to achieve desired outcomes¹¹. Data that make practices more visible can be used to highlight effective practices and identify implementation problems, and develop professional development and supports for teachers to improve their implementation of SEL-related programs and practices. Assessments of teacher practice and program implementation are usually done through questionnaires and observations as described in the "Forms SEL Assessments" section.

Adult Competencies

The social and emotional competencies of adults within the school are important because the adults may influence implementation of SEL programs and practices, the learning environment and student-teacher relationships, among other aspects of a student's learning experience¹². Therefore, it can be useful for adults to assess their own social and emotional competence as part of the SEL implementation process. Tools can help you do this. One example of a tool is the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders' [teacher social and emotional learning self-assessment tool](#), which encourages teachers to reflect on their social and emotional competencies

⁸ Melnick, et al., (2017).

⁹ Dusenbury, L., Calin, S., Domitrovich, C., & Weissberg, R. (2015). [What does evidence-based instruction in social and emotional learning actually look like in practice? A brief on findings from CASEL's program reviews](#). Chicago, IL. Author.

¹⁰ Yoder, N. (2014).

¹¹ Durlak, J. A., & Dupre, E. P. (2008). Implementation matters: A review of research on the influence of implementation on program outcomes and the factors affecting implementation. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41, 327-350.

¹² Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). [The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes](#). *Review of Educational Research*, 79, 491–525.

and how these competencies impact their teaching practice. Adult social and emotional competencies are usually assessed through a questionnaire as outlined in the “Forms SEL Assessments.”

School and District Practices

Along with classroom practices, schools and districts can implement a variety of practices that create systemic support for SEL. In a 2017 policy paper, Hanna Melnick and colleagues indicate that schools that engage in a school improvement process are able to identify SEL-related practices and outcomes they can use to develop action plans to improve teaching, learning conditions and student outcomes¹³. Similarly, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) developed a [rubric](#) that districts can use to gauge how well they are implementing a coordinated set of practices – aligned to CASEL’s theory of action – to support SEL at the district level.

Methods of SEL Assessments

SEL assessment can be administered using multiple methods, including questionnaires/surveys, observations, performance assessments, report cards and interviews or focus groups.

Questionnaires/Surveys

Questionnaires/surveys can be useful to measure a variety of outcome and process measures. For example, instructional staff and non-instructional staff and family members can complete questionnaires to assess students’ SEL competencies and students can complete questionnaires to assess their own attitudes, self-perception and social and emotional competencies and their perceptions of the school climate. Surveys can be a cost effective way to gather high-quality data from these groups and students as young as second grade can generally provide self-report data via surveys. (Note: Surveying younger students can require additional planning.) Surveys provide a method to collect data on a broad range of competencies and practices from a sample or population. Survey data is most valuable and informative when aggregated at the group level, so as not to depend on complete accuracy of self-reports from any one individual. There are several factors to consider when selecting a questionnaire, including:

- Determining which key topics to measure and choosing a questionnaire that is reliable and valid for the intended population of respondents.
- Determining the most appropriate mode of survey administration and ensuring that adequate resources are available for administration – securing sufficient devices, proper timing and training for computer administrations.
- Planning for scanning or planning for the significant time needed for data entry of a paper administration.
- Planning in advance to secure high participation rates.
- Planning for funding because questionnaires created externally often cost money.

¹³ Melnick, H., Cook-Harvey, C. M., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). Encouraging social and emotional learning in the context of new accountability. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <http://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/sel-new-accountability>.

- Determining survey length and scheduling of the survey because there can be respondent fatigue in settings where students are frequently assessed, including frequent academic assessments.
- Developing trust with participants.
- Deciding whether to give the survey to a representative sample or to the full population. We recommend administering the survey to the full population rather than a representative sample, and this method is typically less disruptive to the school day.

Example Types of Questionnaires

Schools/school districts can use multiple types of questionnaires to evaluate SEL efforts, including student self-reports, teacher reports of student competencies, and process measures.

- **Student self-reports:** Student self-reports of their own social and emotional competencies are the most common metric to evaluate student social and emotional competencies. Typically, these measures ask students to rate their perceived strengths and areas of improvement by asking students to rate their development of a skill, the degree to which they use the skill or exhibit a behavior, how easy or difficult they perceive types of tasks, or about their perceptions about themselves (e.g., attitudes towards school, growth mindset). Because students often have a limited perception of their own skills and abilities, many times districts might also include teacher and/or family reports of students' skills.
- **Teacher report of student social and emotional competencies:** Along with student self-reports, teachers provide valuable insights into student social and emotional competencies – insights that students themselves might not notice. Teachers may be asked, for example, to report on student ability to communicate their ideas, regulate their behaviors in class, or exhibit prosocial behaviors. Research indicates that there is a small correlation between student and teacher reports of student social and emotional competencies¹⁴, but more research is needed to better understand this relationship.
- **Process measures:** Research demonstrates that students can provide reliable assessments of teacher practices and school climate.¹⁵ As primary consumers of education, the ways that students perceive the environment and the practices in which they engage provide valuable information about SEL and the degree to which they feel like they actively receive those practices. Thus, process measures through questionnaires provide valuable information that teachers, school and district leaders can use to improve efforts.

Observations

Observations can be useful in assessing student behaviors and classroom practices. Specifically, teachers can observe student behaviors in relation to specific social and emotional competencies on a given task. Although useful for all ages, observations are especially useful for younger students as it can be more difficult and more costly to gather self-report data from younger students. To conduct observations, teachers typically need a structured observation protocol and rubric tied to social and emotional competencies and benchmarks.

Individual observations are time consuming to conduct and if aiming for high levels of reliability and validity, observers should be trained to ensure high inter-rater reliability. However, informal observations can provide

¹⁴ For a review see Melnick et al., 2017

¹⁵ For a review see Melnick et al., 2017

useful formative information about students which helps teachers and students understand strengths and needs for improvement.

School leaders and coaches can also observe classrooms to assess program implementation and changes in practice. For example, school leaders and coaches may use a fidelity observation instrument developed by an SEL program to determine if a teacher is implementing a program with fidelity. Similarly, the [GTL Center](#) identified [10 teaching practices](#) that promote SEL and academic instruction, and the American Institutes for Research (AIR) developed a [coaching tool](#) that can be used during classroom observations. These 10 teaching practices align to observation rubrics that are currently used within schools and classrooms to better understand the types of interactions that teachers and students have around instruction, including Danielson’s Framework for Teaching, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), and Marzano’s Protocol¹⁶.

For an example approach that teachers can use to develop a rubric for social and emotional competencies, read the article by Robert Marzano “[Building SEL Skills Through Formative Assessments.](#)”

For an example of an approach to observe SEL teaching practices, [review AIR’s SEL coaching tool.](#)

Assessments of Student Social and Emotional Competencies

Performance assessments are complex assessments that potentially allow for authentic direct observation of SEL skills and behaviors through specific tasks or computer-based assessments. They are designed to create structured opportunities for students to engage in real-life activities such as working together on a project and interacting during free time or to engage simulated real life experiences through which educators can assess student skills, behaviors, dispositions, etc. Often, performance assessments are comprised of tasks, directions for creating standardized activities in specific contexts, and rubrics for assessing social and emotional skills. When planning performance assessments, consider:

- What resources are available to create authentic scenarios and tasks? For those using assessment kits, the resources may be included in the kit.
- Accommodating cultural needs and preferences in performance tasks and rubric language.
- The need to train observers and raters.
- Connection to academic skills, because many academic activities (e.g., project-based learning, group learning) require use of targeted SEL competencies.

To learn more about how others are using performance-based assessments, including computer-based assessments, [review the SEL assessment blog series](#) from CASEL’s Measuring SEL efforts.

Report Cards

Report cards give teachers an opportunity to provide formative feedback to students and their families on social and emotional competencies. When used, teachers rate students on a variety of social and emotional

¹⁶ Yoder, N. (2014).

competencies or teachers share anecdotes about ways the students demonstrate their use of a variety of social and emotional competencies.

To learn more about how to use report cards to provide formative information on SEL competencies, read [“The Other Side of the Report Card: Assessing Students’ Social, Emotional and Character Development”](#) by Maurice Elias, Joseph Ferrito, and Dominic Mocerri.

Interviews and Focus Groups

Interviews and focus groups are good methods to gain in-depth information and explore attitudes, beliefs self-perceptions, and experiences – they provide a great opportunity to get a personal story behind an experience. Interviews and focus groups are less structured, so they do not provide clearly comparable information or evidence that is easily aggregated across individuals. However, they do provide important insights that allow educators to better understand and apply findings from quantitative assessments such as surveys and observations. For example, survey results suggest that teachers do not see their students demonstrating social awareness in the classroom, then one might conduct a focus group to better understand how this impacts student learning and what strategies teachers are using to effectively promote social awareness. There are many factors to consider when using interviews or focus groups for data collection. One factor is that data analysis is complicated and rarely yields information that can be generalized to the whole population. Other considerations for using interviews and focus groups for data collection include ensuring:

- Interviewers are trained to collect data as systematically as possible.
- Interview protocol is piloted or tried out.
- Procedure for recording the interview is agreed upon to secure privacy of data.
- Enough time is allocated to interview and analyze a high volume of information.

Broad Categories of Purposes

In their series, [“Are you Ready to Assess Social and Emotional Development?”](#) AIR¹⁷ identified three general purposes for assessment which are: information (formative uses), accountability (summative uses), and communication. We broaden these three areas to present specific purposes that might serve district, school and classroom educators with a specific focus on information for formative purposes, including data-informed decision making.

Classroom Assessment of SEL Competencies and Practices

Perhaps the most common purpose of assessment is to gather information to support decision making and continuous improvement. One of the primary goals of implementing SEL assessments in Minnesota districts, schools and classrooms is to inform and support teaching and learning. Educators can improve their practices more explicitly by collecting information to inform instruction and identify student strengths and areas of

¹⁷ American Institutes for Research. (2015). [Are you ready to assess social and emotional development?](#) Washington DC.

improvement. Collecting data allows educators to be more intentional about their implementation of SEL practices.

Informal Assessments

Classroom teachers and staff already engage in many types of assessment activities regularly. Many of these assessment activities are informal. Some informal assessments may specifically focus on a social and emotional competency and others center on aspects of SEL in the process of assessing academic learning goals and objectives. Specific feedback is one of the most powerful mechanisms for supporting students' development of skills and competencies – social, emotional or academic. To support SEL, it is important for teachers to be able to recognize and communicate with students about their social and emotional competence. At the end of this guidance, we provide a set of example rubrics for classroom teachers to consider using as they become more intentional about SEL skill development. The rubrics can be adapted to focus on specific SEL domains and competencies that are selected by the district or school. And, the rubrics can be written to focus on the collection of evidence regarding specific grade-band levels of benchmarks. We provide more information on these approaches throughout this document.

Examples of informal assessments of SEL in the classroom might include:

- Providing data for teachers to use to understand their implementation of SEL programs. For example, educators may want to collect fidelity metrics related to their implementation of a specific SEL program, helping educators identify where there is strong implementation and where they can improve.
- Providing data for teachers to use to understand their implementation of practices. For example, an administrator may observe a teacher implement an SEL practice such as project-based learning and use that observation to identify ways the educator can more explicitly incorporate SEL competencies and principles.
- Teachers using anecdotal notes about how students speak with each other or the way students demonstrate their social and emotional competencies in classroom discussions.
- Teachers using rubrics or learning progressions to assess students' development of a specific social and emotional competency during a group activity.

Formal Assessments

Teachers can also use more formal assessments of student social and emotional competencies. These formal assessments should be collected systematically or in a standardized way in the classroom. Although important, formal comprehensive assessments of SEL domains and competencies should not be undertaken by a single teacher alone. Instead, schools and school districts should adopt schoolwide assessment activities to inform schoolwide efforts in more formal ways. Examples of formal assessments may include:

- A teacher using a computer-based adaptive game that measures a particular SEL competency.
- A teacher using a student self-assessment survey to identify the skills and competencies that students think they have or do not have.
- A teacher using a perception survey to have students rate the classroom climate and teaching practices that promote their social and emotional skills.
- A teacher using a performance-based assessment of a specific SEL skill to identify additional classroom strategies that a teacher can use to help students develop that skill. Building leadership teams also need

to support teachers' understanding of the skills and competencies that they are expected to teach. For example, if a teacher wants to help students develop a growth mindset – a belief that one can develop their talents – she could administer a performance-based assessment on growth mindset to identify additional strategies she might want to use in her classroom.

- A teacher using information gathering for continuous improvement. For example, a teacher may engage in an action research project in their use of advisory periods. The teacher gathers performance-based data and student perception data to determine if advisory periods are working and adjust their course as needed.

Significant Needs

In some cases, students may have significant needs in developing some social and emotional competencies or specific benchmarks. To best meet those needs, educators can introduce targeted or intensive interventions, but the selection of the intervention should be informed by evidence of specific needs. Without appropriate and meaningful assessment information, the target of intervention and the intervention activities themselves will likely be misguided. Individual identification requires a set of rigorous procedures to ensure valid, reliable assessment and fair, appropriate use of assessment results. Decisions about individualized needs and interventions are best made by trained professionals, such as school psychologists, who rightly use multiple measures, contextual information and advice from educators and caretakers for such purposes. We do not recommend that teachers or administrators use SEL assessments or benchmarks for diagnosis or identification purposes with individual students.

Review [CASEL's Measuring SEL webpage](#) for innovative approaches for formal, yet formative ways to measure social and emotional competencies.

Review AIR's "[Ready to Assess Social and Emotional Development Tools Index](#)" on various measures to assess student social and emotional competencies.

SEL Assessment to Inform Practice and Policy

Schools and districts can use information from SEL assessments to understand the strengths and needs of groups of students and make decisions about how to best support them. Districts and schools can also use SEL assessment information over time to evaluate the impact of their SEL efforts. As such, SEL assessment information can be used to explore new opportunities or desired changes in practices (e.g., teaching and disciplinary practices) or policies (e.g., professional development and resource allocation) at the state, district, school or classroom. Social and emotional competencies relate to other important educational issues such as school engagement, school climate and academic achievement. None of these larger issues exist in isolation – as the developmental environment of youth is complex and multilayered. Through decades of research and practice, youth development researchers and youth workers have repeatedly demonstrated a number of consistent findings regarding youth:

- Youth are inherently capable of positive development.
- Positive development results from participating in multiple meaningful relationships in multiple contexts and environments.
- All youth benefit from opportunities for positive development.

- Schools and communities are significant delivery systems for positive developmental opportunities.
- Youth, themselves, are central actors in their own development, creating relationships, context and environments that support optimal development¹⁸.

This positive youth development framework provides a wide range of new opportunities for districts and schools to explore in supporting SEL for all students.

Example Purposes Related to Policy and Practice:

- Providing formative feedback to teachers so that teachers can adjust the content and implementation methods of academic and SEL curricula.
- Providing periodic updates to the school board on district-wide initiatives to enhance relationships among and between students, teachers and staff.
- Promoting self-awareness and involvement of students by sharing results of the schoolwide assessment of social and emotional skills with student leaders and student groups.
- Identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses or needs to inform decisions about ongoing and future efforts.
- Identifying professional development needs for school district personnel regarding embedding social and emotional skills in instructional activities and school programs.

Accountability for District Goals, Program Impact and Funding – Summative Uses

School districts and schools can do assessments to hold themselves accountable for their SEL work.

Districts and schools can set their own goals related to how they meet the Safe and Supportive Minnesota Schools Act requirement to use evidence-based social-emotional learning to prevent and reduce discrimination and other improper conduct. These accountability purposes will be low-stakes and internal to the district and its communities. For example, a district may be interested in administering a school climate assessment to ensure that schools are creating learning environments that support social, emotional, and academic growth of all students.

Similarly, a district may wish to use an assessment to demonstrate the impact of certain programs, initiatives or any set of efforts to improve SEL among students at the classroom, school or district level. This may also include the extent to which a district’s professional development programs and other efforts make a difference for students’ social and emotional skills. Monitoring trends over time with respect to student SEL serves low-stakes accountability purposes as well.

Finally, some special programs or initiatives that build SEL skills may be internally or externally funded. Granting agencies often require evidence of impact or at least some evaluation of outcomes to satisfy the funding agreement. Reports on SEL competencies, implementation of practices (e.g., fidelity metrics) or improvement

¹⁸ Benson, P.L., Scales, P.C., Hamilton, S.F., & Sesma, A. (2006). Positive youth development: Theory, research, and applications. In W. Damon & R.M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of Child Psychology: Vol. 1* (6th ed., pp. 894-941). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

can help satisfy those accountability purposes. In some cases, accountability to funders might be moderately high-stakes, requiring more rigor and planning in SEL assessment.

Example Purposes Related to Accountability for District Goals, Program Impact and Funding:

- Reporting on the impact of a grant-funded program.
- Reporting a program’s effectiveness in improving students’ SEL skills.
- Reporting on the extent to which changes in social and emotional competencies are associated with academic achievement growth in schools.
- Monitoring implementation of programs and practices that support SEL.
- Reporting on the extent to which changes in social and emotional competencies may be associated with other important school outcomes such as attendance and discipline incidents at the school or district level.
- Reporting on whether schools meet the goals regarding SEL benchmarks set by a school district.

Communication about the District’s Story, Mission and Advocacy

Another general purpose for SEL assessment is communication. As districts and schools adopt and implement SEL using our SEL Competencies and Benchmarks or another framework, multiple audiences and stakeholders will be interested in learning about the status of SEL in your district and districts across the state. Above all, the district’s and school’s communication strategies should be clear and direct, requiring strong assessment tools. Schools will want to tell their stories and communicate with teachers, staff, students, families and the broader community about the SEL efforts within the district, school or classroom.

As districts communicate with communities about their World’s Best Workforce (WBWF) plans and efforts, evidence of SEL’s impact will play a more important role, because the SEL competencies are also known to be important in college and career success¹⁹. In the district’s and school’s broader mission to promote college and career readiness for students, establishing strong SEL outcomes will help inform communities about the extent to which districts are achieving that.

Finally, in a time when state and federal budget environments are increasingly constrained, and philanthropic arenas are becoming more competitive, districts will need to tell new stories to promote their goals. In this sense, evidence of SEL outcomes can serve an advocacy purpose.

Example Purposes Related to Communication:

- Updating communities on the mission to support every student.
- Sharing information with parents on the importance and development of social and emotional skills.
- Reporting to the school board on changes in students’ social and emotional skills after implementing a program.
- Including relevant information regarding goals set forth in the district WBWF plan.
- Promoting and sharing positive youth development stories through local media.

¹⁹ Deming, D. (2017). [The growing importance of social skills in the labor market](#) (NBER Working Paper 21473).

Additional Purposes

SEL assessments can also be used to help support district and school staff and their SEL efforts. Districts and schools can use assessment results to show the benefits of SEL and to make continuous improvement for like initiatives. For example, districts and schools can use assessment results to:

- Build safe and positive school environments/climates.
- Inform practice and provide instructional guidance.
- Justify school's efforts to focus on SEL especially given scarce resources.
- Document growth or impact of special initiatives.
- Reduce bullying.
- Provide a new lens to support inclusion and success of all students in the school/district.
- Improve attendance.
- Reduce disparities in discipline and other educational outcomes.
- Inform school improvement plans and goals related to the above points.
- Promote assessment literacy.

As additional purposes are developed or proposed, districts, schools and classrooms should collect evidence to support SEL's impact. Purposes of SEL assessment can vary between low stakes and high stakes. When these assessments are used for high-stakes purposes, they should be administered with more rigorous evidence of quality – requiring more careful selection of assessment tools and implementation fidelity.

Planning and Preparing for Social and Emotional Learning Assessment

To conduct an effective assessment, it's essential for district leaders, school leaders and teachers to consider multiple factors as they plan and prepare for SEL assessment. Factors include choosing the SEL domains and competencies for assessment, level of reporting, accounting for existing implementation, embedding SEL assessment activities in the current system, preparing stakeholders to participate in the assessments and engaging partner districts. Effective planning is essential to maximize the quality of SEL assessments, ensure efficient use of resources and enhance the likelihood your efforts will serve their intended purpose. Planning can also help to identify the supports and infrastructure (e.g., resources, knowledge, systems) needed to implement and sustain new systems for assessment. After educators identify their purpose for assessing SEL, they can use the guidance that follows to prepare for success.

Choosing Social and Emotional Learning Domains and Competencies for Assessment

Choosing the SEL assessments to use – outcomes and processes – can be a difficult task and will depend on the purpose of the assessment, what you are trying to evaluate and if you are reporting at the student, classroom, school or district level. In most cases, not all SEL competencies and benchmarks need to be assessed every year or for every student, teacher or school. An assessment committee can identify an appropriate cycle of assessing SEL on a rotating basis over time. As applicable, a committee can help identify appropriate sampling strategies for each competency and benchmark, and the tools and methods of assessment. A committee can also help monitor the use of data for multiple purposes, including those for which the data were initially gathered.

The domains and competencies selected for district-wide or schoolwide assessment should be consistent with existing school improvement plans or WBWF goals. The assessed domains and competencies should be consistent with existing initiatives, programs or related goals.

The district may decide to assess all social and emotional competencies in all grades or the district may select a given number of social and emotional competencies to assess in a subset of grades. A district could assess odd-numbered grade levels each year in order to include all students during each two-year cycle. Or, in a given year, a district may sample specific grade levels to assess a sample of competencies.

For classroom teachers, it is more feasible to assess students on a variety of social and emotional competencies for formative purposes throughout the year using a variety of assessment techniques. The competencies that teachers evaluate may align with the SEL Competencies and Benchmarks.

District and School SEL Assessment

Ideally, the district or school will have an assessment committee in place that reviews and monitors assessment activities throughout the district. If not, consider creating a SEL assessment committee with a brief and focused charge. An assessment committee can represent the variety of district or school personnel that might be interested in and use SEL assessment results. This committee can provide guidance on several activities, including:

- Selecting appropriate, meaningful assessment tools or sources of data.
- Identifying goals for assessments and sources of data.
- Prioritizing SEL competencies and benchmarks to be assessed and setting timelines for assessment.
- Securing appropriate participation and buy-in and promoting increased use of assessment results to improve teaching and learning.

Aligning with Purpose and Intended Use

For district and school leadership, the SEL assessment purpose should begin as formative – to inform instructional practice, schoolwide programs and district policies. It is important that you align the purpose of the assessment with the questions you want answered about the district, school, classroom or students. For example, a district or school may want answers to the following questions:

- What are the strengths of our students in terms of SEL competencies? Areas of improvement?
- Do student groups differ on their strengths? Areas of improvement?
- How well are teachers implementing the SEL program? How well are they implementing teaching practices that support SEL?
- How are teachers using SEL professional development?
- Has school climate improved since implementing the SEL efforts?

Once you identify the purpose and clearly articulate the intended use of the assessment, your next step is to review and select tools to gather evidence to answer those questions. Certain types of assessment tools can be used to answer targeted questions, so it is important to ensure that the form of assessment aligns with its intended use. For example, student surveys or computer-based performance assessments are a good way to collect information about student social and emotional competencies across a school or district whereas

informal or less structured observations would be difficult to collect district wide. Similarly, a fidelity metric from an SEL program would be useful in understanding implementation quality of an SEL program, however, accurately conducting a fidelity metric requires someone highly qualified from the SEL program.

As a district or school leader considers selecting an assessment, they should ask the following questions to ensure that the assessment aligns with the purpose and intended use:

- Does the assessment define SEL in a way that is consistent with the district or state? Can it inform the achievement of SEL benchmarks?
- Do reports disseminating the data provide meaningful and useful feedback to stakeholders, potentially including teachers and staff, students, families and the larger community?
- Will the assessment provide information about success in promoting SEL?
- Can the data be used for continuous improvement?
- How often do we need to assess student SEL competencies and practices to answer our questions?

Selecting Assessment Tools

Selecting the correct SEL assessment can be a complex task. However, once the decision has been made about the purpose and aligning the purpose with the intended use and form of assessment, there are some practical decisions a district or school can make when selecting the instrument. AIR's [Ready to Assess Decision Tree](#) outlines three additional considerations and decisions that districts and school leaders may take into account as they select an SEL assessment, including the rigor of the assessment, the practicalities in administering the instrument, and the burden and ethics of administering the assessment.

[“Practical Strategies and Resources for Social and Emotional Learning in Practice”](#) provides some guidance around the practical issues related to selecting and administering SEL assessments. Similar resources are listed at the end of this document.

Consider Rigor

Too often, rigor is described as a characteristic of the assessment method or the kinds of data that are gathered. However, most assessment methods can be implemented at different levels of rigor. Because the assessment is a “standardized” tool doesn’t make it more or less rigorous. Because the assessment is “observation-based” doesn’t make it more or less rigorous. Rigor is based on whether or not the assessment tool provides reliable data for valid interpretations for the intended use. Reliability and validity are relatively technical terms and require clear definitions to make them meaningful and useful (and are discussed more in the Technical Requirements for High-Quality Assessments section). Assessment reliability and validity must be established to support appropriate use of assessment results. However, the degree to which an SEL assessment needs to be rigorous depends on its purpose and intended use. For example, informal formative assessments do not require as high-degree of rigor as more formal assessments.

Consider Practicalities

There are many practical aspects to weigh when selecting assessments, including multiple layers of resource considerations. Among them are:

- The cost of purchasing the assessment (per student, per school, per administration).
- The length of time it takes to complete the assessment (per student, per administration, overall).
- Administration training requirements and associated costs.
- Additional costs associated with data management, analysis and reporting.
- If local scoring is possible, the staff effort required to conduct reliable scoring.
- Timeliness of score release.

In some settings, leadership might decide to create a new assessment. The technical challenges in creating and designing new assessments of SEL competencies are prohibitive and should not be attempted casually. Few districts have the content or technical expertise to develop measures with the necessary technical requirements.

Consider Implementation Costs and Ethics

After matching the purpose and rigor of your assessment plan, and checking the practicalities of it, it is time to evaluate the burden or implementation costs. At this point, it is critical for district and school leaders to think about the risks, benefits and capacity to implement the assessment. It is important to consider the full picture – ensuring that the SEL assessments selected meet the intended purpose, provide actionable feedback and the benefits outweigh the costs. Specifically, a district or school leader may consider the following:

- Given the characteristics of the school, students, families, staff and community, do the benefits of SEL assessment outweigh the costs? Engaging stakeholders by helping them understand what is being implemented and why – gaining community buy-in. This will also include developing a consent process for students and parents.
- Given current demands on school personnel, are staff resources available to allocate the time and effort required to fully implement SEL assessments?
- Establish the capacity of the district’s current data collection and data management processes. Are there sufficient resources and expertise to use the data collected for formative purposes and to inform practice?
- Are financial resources available for SEL assessment given existing budgetary constraints? AIR recommends creating a complete budget that includes costs of assessments, administration, scoring and reporting.

Classroom SEL Assessment

Many school personnel are already likely including elements of SEL in their work. Teachers and other staff acknowledge and react to students’ teamwork, interactions, motivation, engagement, emotional states, relationships, self-awareness, self-regulation and many other characteristics, behaviors and dispositions. A core purpose of the SEL competencies and benchmarks is to make these efforts intentional. In that way, school personnel can embed implementation and assessment of SEL competencies throughout their work and current efforts.

Aligning with Purpose and Intended Use

Educators are assessing student social and emotional competencies in informal, formative ways in the classroom through observations, rubrics and various forms of learning progressions. This allows teachers to understand how individual students are progressing on a variety of social and emotional skills. Other times, teachers may

assess students in more formal, formative ways through student surveys, formal rubrics or performance-based assessments focused on social and emotional skills. This provides teachers an opportunity to learn about how the classroom as a whole is progressing or to potentially use the data to differentiate SEL instruction. The type of assessment a teacher chooses depends on why the teacher decides to use the assessment and how they will use it. Potential questions a teacher may attempt to answer using SEL assessments include:

- What skills are my students using (rather than engaging with) as they engage in instruction?
- How are my students developing their social and emotional competencies?
- How are students perceiving their own social and emotional competencies? How are they perceiving the competencies of their classmates?
- How are students perceiving my SEL instruction?
- How can I differentiate my instruction to meet the social and emotional needs of all my students?

Selecting Assessment Tools

Classroom teachers are more likely to assess direct assessments of student social and emotional skills (outcomes) rather than process measures although school leaders do typically share school climate or teacher practice results with teachers to inform their individual practice. To support direct assessment of student social and emotional skills, CASEL created an assessment working group to identify SEL assessments and principles of good SEL assessments. In a 2017 brief, the work group identified three principles when selecting and implementing SEL assessments²⁰. They include the following:

1. *Assessment should be transparently relevant.* It is important to select SEL assessments that align to the targeted social and emotional skills that the students are working on. It needs to be clear to staff what the assessment is measuring. Students should always be informed about the general purpose of data collection (e.g., we are trying to understand your experience in the school and with your teachers). However, the level of details shared should be determined based on the purpose of the assessment. For example, it may be problematic to outline what's being measured prior to giving a self-regulation assessment because sharing details could impact the results given social desirability effects. However, when giving a performance-based assessment on perspective-taking, it may be important tell the students what the teacher is looking for.
2. *Assessments should be practical to use.* Multiple forms of SEL assessments exist, which vary in degree of time to take, expertise to administer and cost. As teachers decide which SEL assessment to use, ensure that it is practical for classroom use (e.g., takes less than 30 minutes, can be completed in the classroom and does not require extensive expertise to administer, analyze and report.)
3. *Assessment data should guide practice.* Use SEL assessments to inform teacher practice. It is important to use the assessment alongside targeted SEL programs or practices—which are detailed in the SEL Implementation Guidance—so that SEL assessment can be used alongside practice.

Although these design principles were created for more formal, formative assessments, they can be applied to more informal, formative assessments that teachers use regularly, such as assessing or appraising a student's routine performance tasks or anecdotal notes teachers make on student's social and emotional skills.

²⁰ McKown, C., Read, L., & Bookman, N. (2017). [Key design principles for district assessments for SEL: Lessons learning from the first design challenge](#). Chicago, IL. CASEL.

Levels of Reporting

Assessments can be used at individual, classroom, group, school, district or community levels. Deciding which level(s) to report will depend on the purpose of the assessment and who is using the assessment – district leader, school leader, teacher or other school staff. The following list contains examples of each level of reporting and includes comments on special considerations regarding SEL assessment. Although this guide is designed for school and district staff, we provide information regarding individual reporting to help teachers consider ways to use SEL assessments as well for formative purposes.

Individual

Assessments at the individual level can be used for three purposes: formative, student self-reflection, and screening and diagnostic.

Formative Purposes

When teachers or other school staff use SEL assessments for formative purposes, they usually make a performance-based assessment or an observation of a student completing a task and use this information to guide the supports individual students need to continue developing their social and emotional skills. For example, a teacher may observe students as they monitor their own progress towards a goal during an individual project.

Self-Reflection

Teachers or other school staff may provide students opportunities to reflect on their own social and emotional competencies. For example, a teacher may provide students an opportunity to take a self-assessment, identify an SEL goal, and provide opportunities for students to identify strategies to work on that goal, including ways to monitor their progress.

Screening and Diagnostic Purposes

There are multiple reasons why teachers or other school staff may use SEL assessments for screening and diagnostic purposes, which tend to be more summative and high-stakes than formative and self-reflection purposes. For example, school psychologists may administer a series of assessments to determine whether a student qualifies for special education services. This level of use requires extensive experience and professional training. Some individual-level assessments used for screening and identification also require specific certification or licensure. In addition, assessments used for individual diagnosis must meet rigorous technical standards to support such high-stakes uses. These rigorous technical standards are Testing Standards described later. Similarly, SEL assessments may be used in the universal screening of students for multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) where students may be identified for interventions and more intensive supports. This also requires a level of evidence and expertise regarding the appropriateness of SEL assessment use for such purposes. In these cases, SEL assessment results can provide useful information to trained professionals conducting comprehensive assessments and evaluations to meet individual student needs, but only as part of a broader assessment process.

Important to Note: Avoid Student-Level Reporting for High-Stakes Decisions

The SEL competencies and benchmarks and associated assessment activities are not intended for individual-level decision-making at this time. SEL assessments should not be used for high-stakes or summative decision-making at the individual level. The legal and ethical requirements are substantial. Implementing schoolwide SEL practices so that they are intentional and embedded in classrooms and school programs will be served best through the use of SEL assessment information for formative purposes at the group level.

If a district intends to include individual-level, summative, high-stakes purposes for using SEL assessment results, district leaders must contemplate and address several serious issues. The “Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing”²¹ (hereafter referred to as Testing Standards) outlines professional standards regarding the use of tests and assessments for educational and psychological purposes. The Testing Standards provide clear guidance on the quality requirements and documentation of rigorous evidence needed to support and defend the use of test scores for individual-level decision-making, including the characteristics and conditions required for appropriate and fair administration and test use.

Classroom and Group

Teachers can monitor their students’ social and emotional development to inform the embedded instructional practices they use that may support further students’ development. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the group of students is a powerful tool for recognizing the whole-child approach to instruction, and this promotes the cognitive and social skills needed for school success. Teachers can aggregate individual-level assessments at the classroom or group level. For example, a teacher may ask students to complete a questionnaire on social and emotional competencies and report the results for the classroom – allowing the teacher to broadly understand group scores. Or, a teacher may take the results of a performance-based assessment on communication and analyze individual student results allowing the teacher to differentiate instruction on communication skills. The SEL District Implementation and Professional Development Guidance provides teachers with many tools and resources with the goal of making SEL instruction embedded, intentional and schoolwide.

Classroom example: To understand how her class is doing on safety standards during science activities compared to last semester, Ms. Rosa had her students work in teams to ensure that the safety standards were being monitored and achieved while they used science equipment during a complicated science lab exercise. To assess this, Ms. Rosa used a group checklist, peer-ratings and her own observation rubric for each group and then compared the class’ overall performance to results from similar assessments during the year. Doing this, Ms. Rosa was able to decide whether her class had mastered this skill set and whether she needs to spend more time on this topic. In addition to the focus on safety standards, she was able to gather information on social awareness (cooperation toward achieving common goals), relationship skills (the communication and social skills

²¹ American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education (2014). [Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing](#). Washington DC: AERA.

to interact effectively), and responsible decision-making (consider multiple factors in making decisions) among students.

School

Schools may be interested in understanding the social and emotional skills and competencies as well as the level of implementation of SEL activities across the school. To do this, the school would need to collect comparable types of data throughout the school such as comparable measures of social and emotional competencies depending on the grade-band of students and the same observation rubric for teachers. Aggregating data and reporting at the school level gives schools the opportunity to understand broadly the school's needs and strengths. In addition, school-level results can be disaggregated to see how and where social and emotional skills are growing for different groups of students. For example, schools can disaggregate data by grade or other student characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity). This helps inform school-level efforts and determine if efforts are working equally across groups of students.

School example: To improve school climate, Lincoln High School closely examined the results of the Minnesota Student Survey's (MSS) student responses on items relating to sense of safety at school, bullying experiences and teacher support of students. Based on the results, the school introduced efforts to promote student-teacher relationships and to increase schoolwide attention to bullying behaviors with explicit communication strategies to clarify what behaviors may be bullying behaviors. The school also explored additional schoolwide social and emotional learning strategies. When the information is gathered and used at the schoolwide level, it frees individuals from the negative consequences of accountability (blaming, shaming and embarrassing), and promotes a collective response and broader engagement.

District

School districts may be interested in understanding how social and emotional competencies (outcomes) might vary across the district and want to conduct a district-wide profile, mapping strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, a district might be interested in understanding the different programs and practices (process) that schools are using across the district, so they can determine which approaches might best influence student outcomes. To do this, the district would need schools throughout the district to collect the same outcome and process data and share that data with the district for analysis and reporting. The district could then disaggregate the data by school, by subpopulation of students and by grade band to identify schools that are having successes and those that are struggling. The district can also use this information to determine where to allocate resources in ways that might enhance SEL practices for both professional development and implementation efforts. By mapping SEL strengths and weaknesses across the district, it's possible for the district to evaluate if it has enough resources and leadership support to promote SEL initiatives and increased integration in district-wide practices. The mapping may also help the districts' schools connect with one another and share information about the successes and challenges they've faced with their SEL efforts. This allows the district to focus its efforts and resources in needed areas.

Community/County/Region

In some instances, multiple districts, counties or regions may want to collect similar types of data with their students and schools. Data can be aggregated to the community, county or region to report on the broader context SEL competence. They can also disaggregate the data by district to identify trends, similarities and differences. Cross-district collaboration allows districts to learn from each other and it provides broader regional pictures of SEL competence. For example, MSS information is available at the district level and the county level. County-wide profiles of student social and emotional skills or related outcomes (e.g., school climate) could inform additional collaborations with county agencies and community organizations further enhancing the capacity of schools and others to promote stronger social and emotional development. This gives districts an opportunity to collaborate around shared goals and challenges and builds opportunities for all youth-serving organizations and agencies to support the SEL efforts regionally.

Consider Existing Implementation and Professional Development Practices

To position assessment appropriately in the context of district goals and activities, school and district leaders must have clear understanding of the existing strategies around implementation of SEL and the associated professional development practices. Specifically, school and district leaders should conduct a readiness and needs assessment prior to starting an SEL effort and continue to collect process measures during the effort. Learn to support these efforts by reviewing the SEL District Implementation and Professional Development Guidance. A list of core issues that school or district leaders may want to consider regarding existing implementation and professional development follows.

- Develop clear descriptions of the district’s current SEL implementation status and consider:
 - Depth and breadth of implementation across grades and schools.
 - Existing relevant classroom activities and formal and informal assessments.
 - Professional readiness to determine what sites are ready for assessment.
 - Staff self-assessment and organizational assessment.
- Clarify organizational goals regarding SEL, so that the assessment work is consistent and embedded.
- Review World’s Best Workforce and school improvement goals to identify existing SEL initiatives.
- Review current teacher and staff professional development opportunities and identify elements of SEL that are currently or have been recently addressed.

Embed SEL Assessment Activities in Current Systems

For district and school-level reporting, it is important to have a clear understanding of where the district and schools are regarding SEL-related efforts. This allows the school and district to begin examining its readiness to engage in SEL assessments in a systematic way. The primary consideration is a clear focus on purpose. Then leaders must identify the school- and district-level capacity needed to support the kinds of assessments being proposed. Districts should develop a communication plan that includes SEL messaging, and build a management structure to complete this work effectively across district and school levels. In most cases, existing plans and structures can be adjusted to embed SEL assessment in a systematic way. Read more about embedding SEL in the SEL District Implementation and Professional Development Guidance. To conduct an effective assessment, it is important for the district to ensure that they have:

- Clarity of purpose – having a clear purpose for the assessment, such as identifying where more support is needed to implement SEL well.
 - Capacity to conduct the assessment. Do we have district and school staff who possess the skills and experience needed to do the assessment?
 - A communication plan for informing and updating stakeholders about the assessment. Learn more about communication planning in the SEL Implementation Guidance.
- Management structures that support conducting an assessment including resources, staff and time.

Prepare Stakeholders

School and district activities are of great interest to multiple audiences, including school personnel, students and families, local communities, businesses, policy makers, and at times, the state and nation. But for the purposes of SEL, stakeholders are primarily within schools and local communities. We encourage schools to focus their SEL efforts for formative purposes, centering the attention locally. As district leaders prepare to communicate with stakeholders on SEL efforts, district leaders can begin by asking the following questions:

- Given the initial purposes of SEL assessment, who are the relevant stakeholders?
- Who needs to know that SEL assessment is being planned and implemented?
- Who needs to be engaged from the beginning – to secure buy-in and successful implementation?
- What is the plan for involving/engaging each stakeholder audience, including who, what, when, and where?
- Depending on the SEL assessment chosen, what stakeholders need to participate in the SEL assessment?

When developing communication plans on the SEL assessment, it's crucial for leaders to consider the role of stakeholders. In the current popular critique of standardized testing, some stakeholders have embraced a negative perception of all forms of testing and assessment. Leaders and educators must consider such opinions whenever communicating broadly about SEL assessment. To help communicate about the SEL assessment, consider the following:

- Ensure that SEL assessment communication is consistent with the district's broader communication plan.
- Attend to how communications set expectations.
- Ensure that messages are consistent regarding appropriate/inappropriate uses of SEL assessment results.
- Consider what stakeholders – particularly students and families – need to know about SEL assessment.

Engage Partners

Don't go down this road alone. Many schools and districts have relationships with other school and districts, locally, regionally or nationally as well as relationships with other external organizations – universities, SEL programs and research organizations. In the absence of existing relationships, consider building them. Networks of partners with shared goals can more effectively implement SEL activities, engage in professional development activities, and administer and use SEL assessments at all levels. A collaborative of partners can also engage in continuous improvement more effectively by sharing and receiving evidence of effective practice. Many other resources leveraging partnerships are available in the final resource section below.

This approach of working with other partners is described more fully in the section on Refining the Assessment System, where we describe several principles of embracing cycles of improvement as promoted by the Carnegie Foundation, including accelerating improvements through networked improvement communities.

Doing Social and Emotional Learning Assessment

As educators move from planning to the actual doing of SEL assessments, there are multiple decisions and actions that educators can take. In this section, we first discuss ways to accomplish SEL assessment. Then, we summarize ways to administer assessment as well as ways to interpret and use assessment information at the district, school and classroom levels. While doing SEL assessments, it is important to review the technical requirements of high-quality assessments and to identify strategies to refine the assessment system as needed.

Positioning SEL Assessment

School personnel conduct assessment activities regularly. Teachers have been called the *ultimate purveyors of measurement*, as they continuously engage in informal or formal assessment activities throughout the day. This includes observing, asking questions, administering, reviewing as well as providing feedback on class activities, assignments, projects, and at times, having students complete quizzes and tests. In most instances, teachers use these assessment tools to gauge academic learning, but most of these assessment tools can also be used to assess student social and emotional competencies. Research underscores the importance of each of these forms of assessments and their necessity for formative purposes, which further the educational purposes of schools.

Throughout this guidance, we've introduced multiple decisions and factors to consider when using SEL assessments. When beginning the actual SEL assessment implementation, multiple decisions must be made, many of which fall into two categories:

1. Administering assessments.
2. Interpreting and using assessments.

In a global sense, the hope is to create a culture of evidence in a larger view of assessment and information gathering in districts and schools. In this larger arena, we engage in evidence-based assessment to promote learning, meet student needs, improve instruction and strengthen curriculum.

District and School SEL Assessment

Administering Assessments

It is important to consider how the assessment(s) will be administered to support high-quality data and to support district- and school-level reporting. For example, schools across the district need to administer the same assessment to have comparable results. Thus, it's necessary for the district or school to consider how to actually administer the assessments – whether they are outcome or process assessments. Assessments can be administered through several different modes, including online (self-report or other) or through traditional paper and pencil, rating scales for teachers and parents to complete, observational rating systems, performance assessments with rubrics to rate characteristics or some mix of these methods. Given the administration

methods for a specific assessment tool, the district or school should select those that are feasible. Administration should always be consistent with the tool’s administration guidelines and should also meet the local needs and preferences of schools – without introducing variation in scores due to variation in administration methods. Variation in scores should only be a function of student differences on the constructs, not because of differences in administration methods.

Interpreting and Using Assessment Information

Interpretation and use of SEL assessment information must be consistent with the assessment tool user guide and consistent with the purposes of doing SEL assessments as defined by the district or school. Once administration is complete, results should be provided as soon as possible. Data should be disaggregated only when there is a large enough student population of students to support disaggregation – typically this should be consistent with the practices of disaggregating Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment test scores. Overall, the primary goal is to use information from results for formative purposes by providing profiles of performance on the SEL assessments at the group level, including classroom, grade level, or school level, disaggregating SEL scores by student groups (e.g., student characteristics). At the district or school level, we recommend that a trained researcher support the data analysis and reporting to ensure appropriate interpretation and use of data. In addition, SEL assessment information can be strengthened by engaging students in the interpretation and presentation of results. Suggested ways a district or school may take to interpret, use and present the data follow:

- Revisit the purpose of the assessment. What is the story you want to tell? How do you want to engage users in the information being shared?
- Consider broadly releasing the information using public discussion forums, presentations, research briefs, infographics, longer narratives, and data-rich reports. Make sure that stakeholders can easily interpret data reports.
- Use assessment information to re-engage important stakeholders including youth, parents, teachers, community members, school board members and funders. It is important to engage stakeholders in the interpretation of results.
- Make sure to collect both outcome and process data, so that assessment information can be used within cycles of improvement.

Classroom SEL Assessment

Administering Assessments

SEL assessment administration within classrooms will differ depending on the purpose of the assessment and the methods of SEL assessment used. As noted in the District and School SEL Assessment section, assessments are administered in the classroom context. In this section, we cover specific measures of how classroom teachers might administer SEL assessments for their own purposes. When teachers are targeting specific social and emotional competencies, it is important to identify assessments or create rubrics that assess the specific competencies. For example, if a teacher wants to understand student mastery of a specific social and emotional skill, they might create a task in which a student has to demonstrate that specific skill such as their ability to communicate their point of view or their ability to identify the steps they can take to calm down when frustrated.

There are tools that currently exist that can support teachers as they administer informal, formative SEL assessments. For example, Marzano identified ways that teachers can create learning progressions for targeted social and emotional competencies in his article "[Building SEL Skills Through Formative Assessments.](#)" In addition, in Appendix A, we include sample observation rubrics that can help teachers create performance-based assessments and rubrics.

Interpreting and Using Assessment

Classroom teachers can use SEL assessments in multiple ways, but teachers **should not** use SEL assessments to diagnose, identify or punish students. Rather, teachers can use SEL assessments to promote positive assets in students. To do this, teachers can use the assessments to guide future lessons, group students based on needs, partner students together or provide opportunities for student self-reflection.

Technical Requirements for High-Quality Assessment Tools

People interested in implementing more rigorous SEL assessments should consider the technical requirements for high-quality tools. In other words, this section is for those who are interested in administering SEL assessment in slightly more formal ways at the district or school level. Recommendations in this section are consistent with the Testing Standards, which are used to protect test users and test takers. The Testing Standards are based on the best thinking available in education and psychology and represent professional expectations and technical evidence required to support test use. In the following sections, we describe relevant Testing Standards. When selecting, administering, interpreting and using SEL assessments, districts should use assessment practices that are consistent with the Testing Standards.

Reliability

Reliability is the degree to which an assessment can be expected to produce the same results over replications – in effect, the consistency of results. Different forms of reliability capture different kinds of replications and different forms of consistency. The kind of reliability that is relevant for a specific use depends on the purpose. Four major kinds of reliability that may be relevant are:

- **Internal Consistency Reliability:** This is perhaps the most common kind of reliability. It indicates the extent to which a measure provides results consistent over the sampling of items. What would scores look like if students were asked a different set of questions? Would the same results be obtained? It indicates how much measurement error there is due to sampling items—the effects of asking specific questions.
- **Test-Retest Reliability:** This measures the consistency of scores over time. If claims are made about the change in scores over time (before and after an intervention), estimates of test-retest reliability will indicate how consistent scores are over time in the absence of a true change in the construct. This allows educators to affirm that changes in scores are due to an intervention or program and negate claims that scores are not the result of instability of scores over time. It indicates how much measurement error there is due to sampling time – the effects of time, instead of the effects of the program or intervention.
- **Parallel Form Reliability:** This is a measure of reliability obtained by administering different versions of assessment to the same people. This is less likely to be relevant for SEL assessment, but sometimes

multiple forms of an assessment are used to avoid the effects of memory on a single form used multiple times. This is also an estimate of the consistency of results over the sampling of items (different items on different forms). Most state testing programs use new forms each year, measuring the same content.

- **Rater Reliability:** Rater reliability indicates how much measurement error there is due to the specific rater (sampling of raters). When assessment scores are the result of ratings from observers or teachers/staff, those raters may introduce variability in scores. Would the same results be obtained if a different sample of raters were involved?

Each form of reliability provides information about the consistency of scores that impact interpretation and use of results. The form, or type, of reliability that most closely relates to the purpose of the assessment or its intended use, is the form you should use. Knowing about the reliability of scores helps users defend the use of those scores. When uses are more high-stakes, more rigorous evidence of reliability is required, which demands higher levels of reliability. Group scores are almost always more reliable (more consistent) than individual scores. This is another reason this guidance promotes group-level use of SEL assessment results for more rigorous assessments and individual-level use of SEL assessment results for more informal, formative assessments.

When selecting assessments, consider the available evidence of score reliability and the forms of reliability being reported. These are important indicators of the potential quality of scores. However, it is important to note that reliability statistics are sample specific. That means that reliability evidence presented in a user's guide for a specific assessment tool may not apply to the data collected in a different population. The Testing Standards require assessment users to estimate and report the reliability for their sample of scores as this is likely to be different than published reports of reliability. Furthermore, estimates of reliability provide information about the precision of scores and can be used to estimate the standard error of measurement. The standard error of measurement can be used to create confidence intervals around scores, providing the clearest information about the precision of scores and help make sense of meaningful score differences.

Important to Note: Not all districts or schools have expertise in house to execute these analyses. Given the complexity of collecting, managing, analyzing and reporting data at the school or district level, we recommend consulting with an external researcher or test developer for initial implementation to ensure psychometric properties are sound in their context.

Validity

Validity is a continuum – it's the extent to which theory and evidence support the intended interpretations and uses of scores. Every intended interpretation and use proposed for the results of any measure or assessment must be supported by theory and evidence. More high-stakes uses require more rigorous evidence. Score users must evaluate the extent to which evidence is available to support the use of scores. There are many sources of evidence, some of which are more important than others for certain purposes.

Kinds of evidence usually reported include:

- **Content evidence:** A theoretical model or operational definition of the social or emotional skill (construct) is provided with a clear statement about how items were developed to provide direct information about the specific skill, behavior, disposition, etc. Expert review is a common source of

evidence, as is an assessment blueprint that describes the characteristics, contexts and features of items as they map directly to the construct being measured.

- Internal structure: Evidence is required to indicate that the items contribute to the overall score or measure and that the structure of the measure is high quality. This is often done with factor analysis models where the industry standard requires confirmatory factor analysis models, not exploratory ones. If there are multiple dimensions or domains being measured, the model must provide evidence that each dimension is relatively independent of the others and that each provides unique information rather than redundant information – information not too highly correlated, with sufficient precision and reliability.
- Associations with other variables: One way to provide evidence that a given assessment is measuring the intended competency is to demonstrate that the measure is strongly associated with other similar measures and weakly associated with measures of different, unrelated skills. This is often done through estimating correlations between the assessment scores of interest and other related/unrelated measures.
- Measurement invariance: This is particularly important in diverse communities. If scores are interpreted as meaning similar things across students from diverse groups, evidence must be provided that the measurement qualities are consistent (invariant) across groups. Evidence of measurement invariance is provided through a number of tests of bias, including differential item functioning (DIF) and multi-group confirmatory factor analyses – does the internal structure of the model apply to students from different groups? Some evidence exploring the functioning of the items and the measure must be provided for the groups that are relevant to the intended community. This might include race, ethnicity, gender, native language, etc.

Very few measures and assessments in the SEL arena comprehensively provide the kinds of validity evidence to support individual-level use of scores for more summative or high-stakes purposes. Individual-level scores are rarely needed to accomplish the purposes of SEL assessment. Typically, schools and districts are implementing schoolwide or district-wide efforts to promote positive SEL growth and development. Information can be collected at the student level, but it becomes more powerful at the group level, providing more meaningful estimates of strengths and weaknesses. Only the most well-established and lengthy assessments, which usually require specialized training for administration, have the level of validity evidence to support individual-level interpretation and use for high-stakes or summative purposes.

When such validity evidence exists for an assessment to be used at the individual level, it should be part of an assessment battery – a larger process of evaluating student needs – conducted by a school psychologist. The challenges in identifying unique student needs are real, but basic SEL competencies and assessments are inappropriate for these uses.

Assessment Tool Quality

All assessments used to inform decision-making at all levels require some evidence of quality. This doesn't require staff to have psychometric expertise, but does require some review of the evidence presented by the assessment publisher or developer. This is another reason why it may be beneficial to collaborate with other districts in the selection of relevant assessment tools. Among the indicators of quality, assessment tools or systems should have evidence regarding:

- Inclusion of diverse student communities in the development of the assessment as relevant to the district. This includes but is not limited to students from different backgrounds regarding gender, race, ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status, immigrant status, English language proficiency and formal educational experiences.
- Measurement properties of the instrument, such as reliability and validity, impact the precision of scores.
- Content coverage and items consistent with the appropriate social and emotional competencies definitions.
- Associations with other important educational outcomes.
- Instrument sensitivity to change.

Testing Standards Regarding Assessment Selection

- When assessments are selected and applied to new or unique populations, test users should gather evidence that such interpretations are appropriate and meaningful.
- Assessment selection should be driven by concepts of fairness to result in scores that minimize bias and the influence of factors unrelated to the constructs being measured.

Testing Standards Regarding Assessment Administration

When considering an alteration of assessment format, mode of administration, instructions or language used when administering the assessment, decisions should be based on a sound rationale and empirical evidence for support so score interpretations are not compromised.

- Student inclusion and exclusion criteria should be clearly articulated and adhered to strictly.
- Accommodations should be considered as appropriately defined in a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) and as appropriate to the assessment so as not to invalidate score meaning or alter the construct being measured.
- Individuals administering assessments have the responsibility of respecting the assessment copyrights and protecting the security of assessment contents – to not disclose specific items, tasks or test contents.

Fundamental to the Testing Standards is the goal of fair assessment practices. Several principles of fairness emerge from the Testing Standards, including:

- Test administrators must consider providing full access and accommodation to ensure that students meaningfully participate in the assessment. This means that the administrators should consider unique needs related to disability, cultural background, linguistic background, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and limited or interrupted formal educational experiences.
- All students should have adequate experience with the assessment format and full access to the intended responses – full opportunity to respond or perform at their optimal levels.

Testing Standards Regarding Score Interpretation and Use

- Test users should strive to understand how the concepts of SEL relate to unique community background characteristics and experiences – acknowledging different ways of knowing and ways of doing, particularly in the context of immigrant communities and students learning English. This speaks to the validity of score interpretation and use.

- Validity evidence should be available to assessment results users to support each intended interpretation and use.
- When student scores are reported in categories or levels of performance, the category labels should reflect the intended inference and be clearly and precisely described.
- Test users should be alert to possible misinterpretation of scores and take steps to minimize inappropriate interpretation and use.
- When assessment results are released, those responsible should provide full explanation regarding appropriate interpretation to minimize misinterpretation and provide access to supplemental material to support appropriate interpretation and use.
- When interpreting results from non-native English speakers, the test user should seek (validity) evidence to support appropriate score interpretation for such communities.
- If evidence supports individual-level score interpretation, scores must not be interpreted in isolation – other relevant and contextual information must be considered.
- Reports of group differences should be accompanied with relevant contextual information related to group differences, including appropriate cautions against misinterpretation particularly regarding causal assumptions various audiences might infer.
- Test users and policy bodies involved in the use of assessment results should monitor the impact of score use and identify and minimize negative consequences.

Test Takers Have Rights

- Privacy of information so that scores are not available or disclosed to others, including student group results with small numbers.
- Know what is being assessed and for what purposes.
- Informed consent (from legal guardian) and assent (from youth) unless the assessment is mandated by district authority.

Test Takers Have Responsibilities

- Represent themselves accurately in the assessment.
- Respect the copyright of all assessment materials.

Refining the Assessment System

School districts should refine their SEL assessment system over time. To the degree that the articulated SEL outcomes and claims are coherent, consistent with the educational mission of the district and aligned with existing curriculum, the SEL assessment system will help the district support, sustain and develop the strongest possible program for securing student success. This coherence should be evaluated on a regular basis.

Districts should also refine the identification of performance goals or expectations. The SEL Competencies and Benchmarks provide guidance for identifying developmentally appropriate levels of SEL for all students as embodied in the benchmarks. But given the current levels of student performance on the SEL competencies, the district will want to address what students should know and be able to do – the extent to which all students should perform at the benchmark and even at what level.

“How much should students know and how well should they be able to do the things we expect?”

With relevant, appropriate and meaningful information, the process of learning from the assessment results can begin. The primary function of assessment is to inform decision-making. Decision-making with at least some information is better than decision-making with no information – although misinformation can be harmful. High-quality data is very powerful in promoting effective decision-making. This has two implications:

1. Assessments must be of high enough quality to produce reliable data for the intended interpretations and uses, with supporting validity evidence.
2. The data must be presented in ways to inform decisions.

The goal is to learn from each assessment activity – from the data and from efforts related to promoting SEL. This is an ongoing process as decisions are made continuously and data is collected informally and formally throughout the year. The inclusion of more data and data of higher quality will inform, and hopefully, improve decisions putting in motion the cycle of improved decision-making, program improvement and greater student learning.

Embrace Cycles of Improvement

School districts can maximize the impact of SEL implementation, professional development and assessment as a component of the larger continuous improvement process²² (learn more in the SEL District Implementation and Professional Development Guidance documents) and by embracing the Improvement Science approach of the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) Centers of Excellence²³. This includes ways in which SEL assessment continues to improve as more measures of SEL become available. In this way, SEL efforts can align with other state efforts, particularly regarding the stages of continuous improvement.

- The continuous improvement cycle must include intentional emphasis on and continuous opportunities for reflection by stakeholders.
- The focus on improvement must be embedded in the initial planning efforts.

Based on the six core principles of improvement from the Carnegie Foundation, the following steps can be helpful in the larger process around SEL assessment²⁴.

1. **Make the work problem-specific and user-centered**²⁵. To be consistent with district goals and initially identified SEL assessment, the most important question to answer is: “What specifically is the problem we are trying to solve?” Answers to this question should create an environment of cooperation and district-wide investment in the process and outcomes with the goal of engaging key stakeholders early.
2. **Variation in performance is the core problem to address**. As broader notions of educational equity are adopted, educators move away from questions about what works—which invites one-size-fits-all approaches—toward questions such as “What works for whom and under what contexts and conditions?” Educators then move away from (blind) implementation with fidelity toward implementation that is tailored

²² Minnesota Department of Education. [Continuous Improvement in Districts and Schools](#).

²³ Minnesota Department of Education. [Regional Centers of Excellence](#).

²⁴ Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. [The Six Core Principles of Improvement](#).

²⁵ Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. [Getting Ideas into Action: Building Networked Improvement Communities in Education](#).

to meet local needs and preferences, which will ensure deeper adoption and implementation success. This requires a deeper understanding of variation within the relevant communities of the school.

3. **See the system that produces the current outcomes.** Educators are less able to improve those things for which understanding is limited or uncertain. Far less process and systems data are collected than outcomes data. It is important to investigate local conditions and systems that shape the work and outcomes of schools and educators²⁶. When hypotheses for change are clearly articulated and made public, new information can be brought to bear on the more challenging issues.
4. **We cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure.**²⁷ When goals are clearly articulated and when specific SEL competencies are selected for targeted improvement, educators can select assessments selected in more effective ways to track change over time. School districts, schools and even classrooms are complex organizations. Efforts around improvement are more effective when intended and unintended consequences are monitored and documented.
5. **Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry.** Prepare and engage in rapid cycles of Plan-Do-Study-Act to learn fast, fail fast and improve quickly. The failures are only failures when individuals and organizations fail to learn from them. The point is to be ready to move through the cycles repeatedly over time with improvements made in each cycle.
6. **Accelerate improvements through networked communities.**²⁸ When districts and schools work in partnerships or networks of schools, schools are able to accelerate the improvement cycle and multiply what is learned. The Carnegie Foundation has supported improvement networks and reported successful efforts across the country.

Appendix A: Sample Observation Rubrics for Formative Uses

Observations can be recorded periodically to capture individual or classroom behaviors (or any group size) regarding displays of SEL competencies via the benchmarks. There are many aspects of benchmarks that can be evaluated, including the momentary display of competencies and the frequency or the consistency in which students display each targeted benchmark. Find examples of this in Marzano’s article “[Building SEL Skills Through Formative Assessments](#).” For some students, observations can be made regarding the level of assistance required for students to display targeted benchmarks. Levels of observations can be gathered over time at specific times when teachers or other school educators provide opportunities and record observation using these or similar rubrics. Specific competencies and benchmarks can be selected as needed or as targeted for specific purposes.

Sample Observation Rubric: Level of Achievement of a Benchmark

Observation Targets: SEL Competency	Achievement Level: Not Yet Developed	Achievement Level: Developing	Achievement Level: Meets Benchmark	Achievement Level: Exceeds Benchmark
Benchmark 1				
Benchmark 2				

²⁶ Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. [A Lesson in System-Wide Change](#).

²⁷ Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. [Revisiting the Purposes of Practical Measurement for Improvement: Learning from the BTEN Measurement System](#).

²⁸ Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. [Why a NIC?](#)

Sample Observation Rubric: Level of Consistency of Displaying a Benchmark

Observation Targets: SEL Competency	Level of Consistency: Little to No Evidence	Level of Consistency: Not Yet Consistent	Level of Consistency: Consistent
Benchmark 1			
Benchmark 2			

Sample Observation Rubric: Level of participation in a given benchmark for students expected to achieve no higher engagement level than participation in some way involving SEL competencies based on a pre-determined statement of expectations as described in the Individualized Educational Program (IEP).

Observation Targets: SEL Competency	Level of Participation: Little to No Evidence	Level of Participation: Less Than Expected	Level of Participation: As Expected	Level of Participation: More Than Expected
Benchmark 1				
Benchmark 2				

Sample Observation Rubric: Level of assistance required in a given benchmark for students needing some assistance to engage in and display SEL competencies based on a pre-determined statement of allowable assistance as described in the Individualized Educational Program (IEP)

Observation Targets: SEL Competency	Level of Assistance: Little to No Evidence	Level of Assistance: More Than Allowable	Level of Assistance: Allowable Level	Level of Assistance: Less Than Allowable
Benchmark 1				
Benchmark 2				

Other ways to describe levels of performance can be found in many resources available to help develop rubrics. The specific levels of a rubric should provide formative information for improvement of instruction and programming. Others ways to describe levels of performance in rubrics include:

- Beginning, Developing, Progressing, Extending
- Ineffective, Developing, Effective, Highly Effective
- Infrequent to never, Occasionally, Sometimes, Often to Always

An alternative is to tailor rubrics to the specific benchmark where each level of the rubric represents a specific level of accomplishment. Such rubrics are more difficult to develop but also have more potential to provide

useful formative information. Tailored competency-specific rubrics should be developed in cooperation with others. This would be a good task for a network of districts.