

**Collaboration Tools for Building SEL Across   
the School Day and Out-of-School Time**

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**Part I: Start with the why**

Those who are involved in implementing systemic social and emotional learning most likely have a personal “why” that brought them into this work and keeps them engaged. Surfacing these personal stories can create deep connections among teams and between colleagues. When we share what motivates us on a personal level to do this challenging work, we will inevitably find connection and understanding, which could become the foundation for effective collaboration. Consider using one of the following protocols or activities to guide this exploration.

* Liberating Structures: [Nine Why’s](http://www.liberatingstructures.com/3-nine-whys/) 
  + When a group discovers an unambiguous shared purpose, more freedom and more responsibility are unleashed. You have laid the foundation for spreading and scaling innovations with fidelity.
* National School Reform Faculty: [Becoming One Community](https://www.nsrfharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/one_community_0.pdf)
  + Coming together as one group entails developing a common identity and foundation.
  + Framing Question: What do we have to have to be ‘us’?
* National School Reform Faculty: [Connections](https://www.nsrfharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/connections_0.pdf)
  + Connections is a time for individuals to reflect, within the context of a group, upon a thought, a story, an insight, a question, or a feeling that they are carrying with them into the session, and then connect it to the work.
* CASEL Internal Protocol: Leadership Stories
  + Invite one team member to share his or her personal journey in the form of a narrative during longer meetings (ideally quarterly or every other month). In sharing about our journey, the personal purpose behind this work is unearthed and connections are deepened.
* Leverage the [3 Signature Practices](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/three-signature-sel-practices-for-adult-learning/), particularly Welcoming Activities and Optimistic Closures, to surface or reconnect to individual and collective purpose.
* Pose thoughtful questions and discuss as a group.
  + Why did you decide to go into education or work with youth?
  + What do you believe about youth?
  + Why is it important that you are part of this community?
  + What is your dream for our youth?



**Part II: Bring people together**

Powerful partnerships are built on co-creation among people who bring their unique lens to the group. Thoughtfully consider who should be involved (see CASEL School Guide guidance on [Creating a Team](https://schoolguide.casel.org/focus-area-1a/create-a-team/), [OST-enhanced version](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/assembling-an-sel-team-ost/)) and how to bring the group together logistically.

1. **Scheduling with everyone in mind.**

Be explicit about the challenges in scheduling regular time together among people with varying workdays and busy calendars. By first acknowledging the difficulties in finding a time, people may be more amenable to dates and times that are not ideal, but workable.

* Select to schedule regular meetings either at one time that works for everyone (e.g., Fridays at 1 PM) or move around the time to accommodate varying schedules.
* Consider sending out a [Doodle poll](https://doodle.com/) to the group.

**2. Leverage technology when needed.**

If getting everyone around the table, literally, poses a challenge, use video chat so everyone can see each other’s faces. When scheduling a video meeting, be sure to include the link and instructions for logging on in your calendar appointment. Recommended video conference platforms include [GoTo Meeting](https://www.gotomeeting.com/), [Slack](https://slack.com/), and [Zoom](https://zoom.us/).

**3. Record-keeping is your friend.**

Prioritize documenting the work of the team with comprehensive notes and minutes to help people stay in the know of developments and progress made.

* Set up a process for developing an agenda where more than one person adds items and updates.
  + Example: Everyone sends agenda items via email by the end of the day Wednesday before our check-in call on Thursday.
* Take notes in the agenda, and clearly identify next steps and action items.
* Consider keeping a running list of check-in notes in a Google or OneDrive document that everyone has access to (Bonus: This also limits the number of emails!).

**4. Use meetings as an opportunity to see each other’s work.**

Use meeting locations as an opportunity to see one another in action and become more familiar with the way the other side of the partnership operates. If you are holding a meeting at the school building, invite OST folks to come early and observe; then, another time, consider bringing school folks to the OST space and return the favor.

**5. Schedule follow-up meetings in advance of professional learning, conferences, and trainings.**

Plan ahead to come together when you return to share lessons learned and debrief the experience. [The Management Center’s](http://www.managementcenter.org/) [Debriefing Template](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1bFTkiB_-pPsSn3vaTpOMHLuW-YK5H3fGa7z82pqx92s/edit) can help guide this conversation.

**6. Take care of people!**

Particularly when people are traveling or re-arranging their schedules to attend an in-person meeting, hospitality is a priority.

* Share suggestions for any logistics, such as parking.
* If people are traveling to attend the meeting, offer space for them to take a call immediately before or after the meeting or attend to other pressing work.
* As appropriate and as possible, provide lunch and/or snacks.



**Part III: Establish working agreements, routines and rituals for your team**

Beyond guiding SEL implementation across the school community, the SEL team is held up as a model for the promise of systemic social and emotional learning. Therefore, it is important to pay special attention to how the SEL team will function and interact internally before becoming a model to the larger community.

**Set ground rules or norms**

Developing group norms is highly beneficial for building a strong team dynamic and positive working relationship. Team norms are most effective when they are developed collaboratively by the team and updated as needed, which mandates revisiting the norms periodically.

Consider the following questions, from the [CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL,](https://schoolguide.casel.org/focus-area-1a/create-a-team/build-a-strong-team-dynamic/) as you develop team norms:

* What habits will help this team run efficiently and effectively?
* What habits will help this team achieve its goals?
* What accommodations can we make to ensure that all stakeholder voices are heard?
* What will we do if we aren’t in agreement?
* How will we hold each other accountable?
* How will we celebrate both small and large successes?

It is recommended that teams compile a list of between three and eight team norms that everyone agrees to uphold. Some teams choose to have the norms printed on each meeting agenda or posted on a wall, while other teams review the norms at the start of the meeting and do a check-in about how they attended to the norms at the end of the meeting. Regardless of the approach chosen, the important part is that the norms become a living guide for how the team commits to approaching the work together.

**Establish team routines and rituals**

Making SEL an explicit part of regular team meetings can help keep collaboration on track, continually build trust among a team, and create a through line for cultivation of adult SEL.

CASEL’s 3 Signature Practices—welcoming activities, engaging practices, and optimistic closures—can foster a supportive environment and promote SEL. The [CASEL 3 Signature Practices Playbook](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/three-signature-sel-practices-for-adult-learning/) offers additional context for these practices, along with many examples of different strategies for teams to try out. As teams grow more comfortable, consider having different individuals take ownership of the welcoming activity or optimistic closure.



**Part IV: Work on cultivating your social emotional competence together**

Exploring and learning about our own social-emotional competence can be a powerful way to unify a team and foster collaboration. Social and emotional learning is a process we all must continue to invest in as we grow into our personal and professional identities. And, cultivating a team of adults who engage together in their own exploration can foster deeper understanding, trust, and psychological safety—a strong foundation for collaboration.

**Send a strong message**

Where we invest time and effort is a strong statement of our priorities. Dedicating time for adults to engage in their own social and emotional learning, as individuals and as a team, sends a powerful message that the community is deeply committed to systemic SEL, and that begins with adults.

**Foundational learning**

Before we can look inward and engage in the self-exploration necessary to lead for SEL in our communities, it is critical that we all have a shared understanding of social and emotional learning. What is our hope for all youth? What does SEL mean for our community? What does it look like? These critical questions, adapted from the [CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL](https://schoolguide.casel.org/focus-area-1a/foundational-learning/), help foster a collective understanding and awareness of the work ahead. Further, through these foundational conversations, teams automatically begin the process of deepening their own SEL practice, as all five competencies are activated towards a shared purpose.

**Personal reflection**

Engaging in personal reflection and assessment of our own social and emotional skills can spark a desire to learn more and engage more deeply. Each person on a team brings different strengths to the work, which we must be able to identify and tap into for strong collaboration. This [adult SEL self-assessment](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/adult-sel-self-assessment-ost/), adapted for a wider audience from the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, can help guide this personal reflection and a team discussion of how to move forward with this important insight.

**Be explicit**

Whether we are aware of it or not, we “do” SEL in all of our interactions as we move throughout our days. The challenge, often, is to explicitly name our intention. Restating our purpose and being explicit about our intent to cultivate SEL and team collaboration can propel us towards that goal.



**Part V: Develop a shared vision**

A shared vision represents the unified hopes and aspirations of a team. A vision statement for SEL should be an inspirational guide as we embark upon and continue the work of systemic SEL implementation.

**Gather voices**

A shared vision is only as powerful as those who share in the development and ownership of that statement. In addition to ensuring the SEL team all have a voice in the process, gather key stakeholders—families, parents, staff, teachers, youth and community partners—to contribute to the development.

**Co-constructing a vision**

The process of creating a shared vision builds a team dynamic. The [CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL](http://schoolguide.casel.org) offers a resource, “[Steps for Developing a Shared Vision for SEL](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resources/steps-for-developing-a-shared-vision-for-schoolwide-sel)” and an [OST-enhanced version](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/steps-for-developing-a-shared-vision-for-schoolwide-sel-ost/) of this tool, to guide SEL teams through the process.

Particularly when you are bringing together stakeholders with different perspectives—for example, OST program staff, parents and school teachers—dedicate time for people to share their vantage point on their vision for the work. It is important that an overall vision for SEL includes these perspectives so that everyone sees themselves in the work and feels invested from the onset.

Ensure that the process of developing this shared vision models the collaboration you hope to foster through the SEL initiative more broadly. Be inclusive and considerate, gather input and feedback, and model transparency.

**A unified message**

Communicating this shared vision broadly fosters ownership of the work among the school community and serves as an anchor as the work develops. Once the shared vision has been adopted by the SEL team and approved by leadership (which often takes several rounds of revision!), make the shared vision a living statement. By having a shared vision that is visible and actionable, you draw attention to the work to follow and elevate SEL as a priority. Consider [creating a communications strategy](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resources/creating-a-communication-strategy) ([OST version](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/creating-a-communication-strategy-ost/)) to spread the message and increase visibility. This strategy may include asking leadership to email out the shared vision in staff communications, including it in family or parent newsletters, bringing it forward in staff meetings, and publishing it on websites.

**Revisiting the shared vision**

To ensure that the statement adopted continues to resonate as you roll out the SEL work, plan to revisit the shared vision periodically. Dedicate time as an SEL team to review the shared vision and discuss whether your rollout embodies that aspiration. As you make mid-course corrections with SEL implementation, you may want to tweak the SEL vision statement and/or promote further communication on the vision to re-energize stakeholders.



**Part VI: Find yourself**

Before we can make a plan for the path forward, we need to know where we’re starting from and what is already in place.

**Welcome diverse voices**

Take the time to have a conversation as a full team, including all partners in systemic SEL implementation, about the current state. Remember to include youth, families, and partners in your discussions of needs and resources. Building youth voice into your plan and enlisting the support of families and out-of-school time and other partners will move the work forward more quickly over time.

**Conduct a needs and resources assessment**

Conducting a needs and resources assessment helps teams identify what is already in place or what work is already happening that should be lifted up and leveraged in moving toward full implementation. What programs, initiatives and efforts can help inform the SEL rollout strategy? What lends itself to alignment with systemic SEL?

The [Systemic SEL Program and Initiative Inventory tool](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/systemic-sel-program-and-initiative-inventory-ost-version/) embedded within the School Guide helps teams learn about past and present SEL-related work that has occurred in the school community. It includes an interview protocol, as well as guidance for analyzing information learned from interviews and surveys, to help guide decision-making on what programs, policies and strategies should be built upon or reinstated.

**Discuss the current state of SEL in all spaces**

Even teams at the very beginning of their SEL journey are likely already doing work to support SEL that can be built upon or leveraged. This conversation can be a valuable jumping-off point for developing a deeper understanding of each other’s work and strengths as you build towards SEL implementation. It’s critical, in these conversations, to think about all spaces, from classrooms, to after school spaces, to the front office and staff meetings.

**Examine your responses**

* What are your school’s strengths?
* Where are there gaps in implementation?
* Why might these gaps exist?
* What seems most critical to address?



**Part VII: Chart the course with a roadmap**

Creating a plan together for how this work will unfold will foster the greatest sense of commitment among team members.

**Ensure equity of voice in the development process**

“Those who build it, buy it” is a powerful motto for creating momentum and ownership of the work. When you bring people on a team together to co-construct an implementation plan, they are more likely to see themselves in the work and be invested in the process. To that end, take measures to ensure equity of voice. Use structures and protocols that allow everyone opportunities to voice their perspectives. Recognize that people process information in different ways and structure planning meetings to allow for that diversity, planning for some individual processing time, small-group or pair discussion, and full-group conversation.

**Plan for additional time**

Effectively planning for full-scale implementation of systemic SEL is a collaborative, multi-step process that requires reflecting on current efforts, establishing clear goals, identifying actions you’ll take to achieve your goals, and continuously reflecting on data and adjusting strategies to improve implementation. In short: Systemic SEL implementation is a multi-year process!

**Where to start?**

The [School Guide rubric](https://schoolguide.casel.org/rubric/) (and [OST-enhanced version](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/downloadable-blank-rubric-ost/)) are designed to move teams through the planning process so that the next steps are clear and achievable. Encourage team members to individually prepare for planning meetings by familiarizing themselves with the rubric. Then come together as a team to begin completing the rubric and assessing your current state. This [rubric meeting template](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/rubric-meeting-template-ost/) can help teams plan for facilitating the meeting.

**From Rubric to Action**

After completing the rubric, the team is ready to move into planning. Start with creating an implementation plan for at least the first year. Consider starting with a few priority areas that you want to focus on in the beginning of implementation and develop goals and action steps for each priority accordingly. The School Guide offers a process for developing [SMARTIE Goals](https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/developing-smartie-goals-for-sel-ost/) complete with examples. You’ll know that the implementation plan is ready for feedback when you have not only established clear goals, but action steps and ownership to move forward.

**Backwards Mapping**

Many organizations and districts find it helpful to do work on where they want to be in two or three years, then work backwards to create a one-year plan. It can be helpful to have the multi-year end goal in mind (and in writing) to be able to create plans leading to that goal.



**Part VIII: How to disagree agreeably**

**Listen with intention**

Often when we reflect on disagreements of the past what comes to mind are negative feelings of frustration. In the heat of a disagreement, it can feel like we’re going around in circles, each repeating the same talking points that go “in one ear and out the other” while the person on “the other side” does the same.

What would it look like to disagree differently? Particularly in a work setting, professional disagreements that are grounded in active listening could give way to deeper relational trust and more productivity.

This tool from Bright Morning Consulting, [Listening to your Listening](https://brightmorningteam.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Listening-to-Your-Own-Listening.docx), breaks down different types of listening in the form of a self-assessment. In disagreements, we often slip into either the disagreement style (I want to interject with a disagreement, to discuss or debate something the speaker is saying) or the uncomfortable feeling style (I’m experiencing an uncomfortable emotion because of what the speaker is saying - annoyed, impatient, judgmental, bored…).

What if instead, we listened from another stance? [Active listening](https://medium.com/@ellekaplan/active-listening-the-key-to-strong-workplace-relationships-productivity-and-personal-72650f32da4c) can be defined as the process of giving your complete, intentional focus to what someone says, rather than what their words literally mean. To listen actively is a conscious choice we make in the moment that requires skill and practice.

**Acknowledge first**

Acknowledge what the other person says first and acknowledge their feelings before you disagree. Often in a disagreement, we are too preoccupied preparing our next argument to truly listen to what the other person is saying. By committing to first acknowledging what the other person is saying you will not only be more likely to hear what they are trying to convey, but it is more likely that they will feel heard and respected in the conversation, leading to a more likely positive outcome.

The following reflective stems may help you acknowledge where the other person is coming from and/or how they are feeling:

* So…
* In other words…
* What I hear you saying is…
* As I listen to you, I’m hearing…
* It sounds like…
* You seem (insert emotion)

Want to see some of these stems used as examples, check out this short video: [5 Essential Phrases for Active/Reflective Listening.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgLfz3dh5UE)

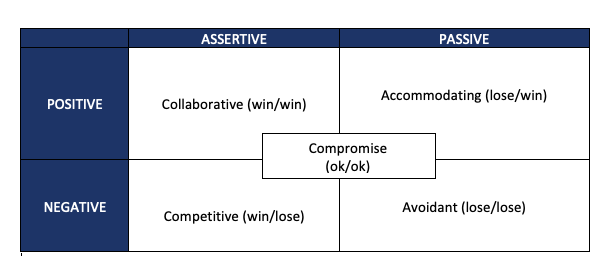
**Speak carefully**

The words that we choose carry weight, particularly in a disagreement when our guards are already up. As you think about what you want to say, consider how it might be received. Try to speak in “I statements” to keep the focus on your feelings and beliefs, rather than “you” statements that may lead to shifting blame and attributes onto the other person. Avoid using the phrase, “you’re wrong” and try to replace “but” with the word “and” as a more productive transition word.

**Choose a stance**

As an overall suggestion, think about how you want to be in this particular disagreement. Are you being confrontational when you had hoped to be collaborative? Are you avoiding a disagreement?

[School-Connect](https://www.school-connect.net/) teaches young people that there are five main response styles: collaborative, competitive, accommodating, avoidance, compromising. If you’d like to shift to a different response stance, think about whether you are approaching the disagreement positively or negatively as well as from a passive or assertive place.





**Part IX: Navigating difficult conversations**

**Preparing for hard conversations**

Scenario: You receive a meeting invitation with a short note in the email referencing a topic you know will be a challenging conversation. Your pulse might quicken. You might quickly accept the invitation and close out of the window, or you might ignore the invitation for the time being. Whatever your initial response, the advance notice is actually an opportunity. When you know a tough conversation is coming up, that means you have time to prepare.

Consider engaging in a written reflection thinking through some of the following preparation questions (adapted from both [Bright Morning Consulting](http://brightmorningteam.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Qs-to-ask-to-prep-for-HC-.docx) and the [UN](https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/Preparing%20for%20a%20Difficult%20Conversation_0.pdf) tip sheet)

1. What is hard about this conversation?
2. What’s coming up for me?
3. Where is the need for this hard conversation coming from?
4. What is the purpose of the conversation?
5. What do I need to learn about or research in order to prepare?
6. What do I hope the outcomes will be?
7. Which skills will I need to use in this conversation?
8. How will I prepare for this conversation?
9. What questions do I want to ask during this conversation?

**Prepare to show up**

Guidance from both [Forbes](https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashiraprossack1/2018/10/28/how-to-have-difficult-conversations-at-work/#743d810510b7) and the [Harvard Business Review](https://hbr.org/2019/01/4-things-to-do-before-a-tough-conversation) suggest that you pay careful attention to how you show up in the conversation. Think about your motives and purpose. What do you really want for yourself? For the other people part of this discussion? Why are you all having this conversation at this time? If you haven’t already, review the section of this toolkit on “how to disagree agreeably”.

**In the moment**

Sometimes you may be leading these difficult conversations. Consider one of these three opening prompts to begin the discussion productively:

1. "I could really use your help with a challenge I am having."
2. "I would love your perspective on this situation."
3. "Can you please help me to understand something?”

As the conversation unfolds, listen intently with and remain curious. Seek to learn more about others’ perspectives and better understand where they might be coming from by asking thoughtful questions.

When you choose to speak, be clear and direct with your language. Reference the pre-work that you did to ensure you are grounded in your intent and hopes. Offer solutions when appropriate and possible. Check in with yourself emotionally as the conversation progresses. How are your emotions affecting how you show up in this conversation?

When the conversation comes to a close (or you are running out of time) think about how to end on a reflective and optimistic note. Be sure to thank the other people in the conversation for their time and insights.