



STATE BRIGHT SPOTS: SEL AND THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT

ALIGNING SEL EFFORTS ACROSS SCHOOLS, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES | BRIEF 2 OF 3

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The [American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 \(ARP\)](#) provided a \$122 billion historic federal investment in K-12 education to help states and districts safely reopen schools and address students' academic, social, and emotional learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Under ARP, states and districts are required to spend 5 percent and 20 percent of funds respectively to address learning loss through evidence-based interventions that respond to the academic, social, and emotional needs of students.

CASEL has recommended [three priority areas](#) for social and emotional learning (SEL) investment that can assist states and districts in optimizing ARP for student success:

1. Promote social and emotional learning (SEL) for students
2. Align SEL efforts across schools, families, and communities
3. Support adult SEL competencies and capacity building

This “Bright Spots” brief highlights policy innovations around Priority Area 2—aligning SEL efforts across schools, families, and communities—through state investments in evidence-based SEL to support academic recovery and social and emotional well-being, the need for which was made abundantly clear by the COVID-19 pandemic. A [brief for Priority Area 1](#) was published in December 2022 (Godek et al.), and an additional brief for Priority Area 3 is forthcoming.

Research has shown that “[58 percent] of parents reported that their children’s academic development had been negatively impacted by the pandemic,” while 61 percent of parents reported the same when it came to their child’s social and emotional development ([Hanno et al.](#), 2021). Parent concerns about learning loss were confirmed by recent National Assessment of Educational Progress results, which have shown historic declines in student achievement in reading and math, as well as in civics and U.S. History ([National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), 2022; 2023).

Additionally, a 2022 report by the [Government Accountability Office](#) found that 1.1 million teachers nationwide reported that they had at least one student who never showed up for class in the 2020–2021 school year. The [U.S. Surgeon General](#) has noted the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth (2021); for example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 51 percent rise in suicide attempts among teen girls ([Yard et al.](#), 2021) and nearly one in three parents reported their children’s mental health was worse than it was before the onset of the pandemic ([Panchal et al.](#), 2021).

According to the [United States Department of Education](#) (ED), an initial review of submitted ARP plans showed that a majority of states described efforts to expand SEL, with funds targeted to support students disproportionately impacted by the pandemic (2021).



Our analysis dives deeper into examples of how states are leveraging ARP funds to improve SEL for all students through collaboration among schools, families, and communities.

Family and community partnerships are a key priority for high-quality SEL policies, practice, and implementation. When families feel valued as partners in the school, they can also learn how to support and build on schoolwide SEL practices in their homes ([CASEL](#), n.d.a). Additionally, research suggests that evidence-based SEL programs are more effective when they extend into young people's home lives ([Albright & Weissberg](#), 2010). It is, in fact, so integral to effective SEL that “authentic partnerships” with families and caregivers and “aligned learning opportunities” with communities have their own place within the “CASEL wheel” framework ([CASEL](#), n.d.c).

[ARP](#) explicitly makes the connection to family and community engagement (FCE) in multiple ways. It allows investments in FCE by permitting, in Section 2001(e)(2)(A), spending on “any activity authorized by the [Elementary and Secondary Education Act \[ESEA\] of 1965](#),” which gives states and districts the flexibility to use funds to meet their needs, including increasing FCE to improve student achievement. Further, ESEA includes robust parent and family engagement requirements across ESEA programs.

“Full-Service Community Schools” are also specified in Section 2001(e)(2)(L) of ARP as an allowable use of funds to support student mental health and address students’ academic, social, and emotional needs. Full-Service Community Schools are an authorized program under ESEA and are defined as a public school that “participates in a community-based effort to coordinate and integrate educational, developmental, family, health, and other comprehensive services” and “provides access to such services in school to students, families, and the community.”

Additionally, ED’s [Interim Final Rule](#) on requirements for ARP asserts that state educational agencies must “engage in meaningful consultation with various stakeholder groups on its ARP ESSER plan” and includes families in its list of stakeholders.

We found through our analysis that states are leveraging funds to support students’ social and emotional development through FCE. In addition to creating policy guidance to reinforce the use of funding for evidence-based SEL programs, states are investing in FCE-centered SEL practices, such as: sharing resources and strong communications around SEL with families; integrating and coordinating SEL-related services between students, families, school staff, and community-based services and/or providers; and developing and expanding Full-Service Community Schools, for which “social [and] emotional learning is a bedrock” ([Maier et al.](#), 2017).



STATES' ARP INVESTMENTS IN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Below are highlights from our analysis of state ARP spending plans, with a focus on practices that connect SEL across school, family, and community contexts.



In 2021, **the California Legislature** approved the "[California Community Schools Partnership Program Act](#)," which defines a "community school" as a public school that includes, among other practices, "family, pupil, schoolsite staff, and community engagement" and "professional development to transform school culture and climate, that centers on pupil learning and supports mental and behavioral health, trauma-informed care, social [and] emotional learning, restorative justice, and other key areas relating to pupil learning and whole child and family development."

Since its enactment, California has begun braiding local, state, and federal funds, which include ARP investments, to help catalyze the development and growth of the [California Community Schools Partnership Program](#). The resulting \$4 billion investment was designed in part to "improve student outcomes by addressing students' academic, cognitive, physical, mental, and social [and] emotional needs." It also prioritizes schools that primarily serve students eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

Further, the state is establishing a network of at least five regional technical assistance centers to support community school grantees to conduct SEL-related work such as:

- Developing models that integrate a Multi-Tiered System of Supports.
- Developing designs and strategies for relationship-centered schools that can sustain a positive culture and climate and restorative practices.
- Performing community needs assessments.
- Improving family and community engagement and partnerships.
- Coordinating services across agencies and schools.
- Collecting data about student experiences and outcomes that inform a process of continuous improvement.

Additionally, the [Expanded Learning Opportunities Grant](#) provided nearly \$1.2 billion in ARP funds to local education agencies to implement seven strategies, including "training for school staff on strategies, including trauma-informed practices, to engage students and families in addressing students' social [and] emotional health needs and academic needs."



The Hawai'i State Department of Education is using ARP funds to promote four systemwide foundational strategies to provide a common framework of expectations and supports to help address the array of student needs that have developed since the pandemic.

The [Educational and Fiscal Plan](#) provides guidance for state and local area leaders to implement consistent systemwide strategies titled "Effective Academic Practices," "Action-Oriented Data Decision-Making," "Responsive Capacity Building," and "Healthy Habits, Healthy Schools." Within the "Healthy Habits, Healthy Schools," initiative, Hawai'i is investing \$5.12 million of ESSER funds to create leadership positions throughout the state. These leaders are providing professional development to help staff:

- Build the social and emotional skills of students, staff and community.
- Build skills to promote resilience through trauma-sensitivity training.
- Collaborate with students, families, and community partners.
- Ensure early identification and provision of supports.
- Establish foundational beliefs regarding student well-being with educators.
- Fortify a culturally responsive positive behavioral support system.

Hawai'i is also using ARP funds to provide all schools with access to SEL data tools for monitoring and addressing students' social, emotional, and mental health needs in partnership with [Panorama Education](#) and [Hazel Health](#).

[Resources](#) to support students' and families' understanding of SEL competencies have been shared and continue to be promoted by schools. Additional resources to support family engagement with schools are being provided by the "Responsive Capacity Building" state leads, including communication and data tools to help schools and communities better identify what supports are needed to facilitate student success.

Additionally, the resources below are part of the Hawai'i Department of Education's family and community engagement response to the pandemic:

- [Community-Based Organizations](#)
- [ESSER Educational Plan and Fiscal Plan Summary](#)
- [Family Involvement](#)
- [Parent-Community Network Centers](#)
- [Support for Parents](#)



The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary

Education has spent or committed roughly \$8.1 million of ARP funds (in addition to almost \$8 million in ESSER II dollars) to the [Massachusetts SEL and Mental Health Grants](#). These grants support public school districts and communities to adapt, expand, or strengthen Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to respond to the social, emotional, and behavioral health needs of students, families, and educators and to build strong partnerships with community-based mental health agencies and/or providers. The grants aim to build the capacity of school districts, charter schools, and educational collaboratives to:

- Develop comprehensive, integrated multi-tiered systems for student, family, and educator social, emotional and/or mental health supports.
- Build sustainable infrastructure to facilitate integrated coordination among schools, students, families, school staff, and community-based services and/or providers.

In Fiscal Year 2023, 111 districts in Massachusetts received funding to develop a multi-tiered system of social, emotional, behavioral, mental health, and well-being supports and to build sustainability efforts through community-based coordination and access to services.

Thus far, school districts are using funding to support SEL, wellness, behavioral, and mental health initiatives including:

- Attending professional development opportunities to build skills and knowledge to better support students, staff, and families.
- Building connections with community partners and mental health agencies.
- Building MTSS, SEL, and wellness practices.
- Implementing data practices to address and develop policies and practices to support behavioral, mental health, social, emotional, and wellness needs in district and schools.
- Supporting restorative practices.



Mississippi has invested nearly [\\$14 million](#) in the [ARP Learn More grant](#), which is being used to support activities and interventions that accelerate learning to respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs. By expanding access to serve more youth, with an emphasis on students and communities from subgroups disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, Mississippi aims to reduce barriers to ensure equitable opportunities to benefit from services and support. One of the three allowable strategies to address the needs of these subgroups is through a program goal of "Family Engagement."

Applicants are required to identify practices to meet the social, emotional, and mental health needs of the participating students, which can include identifying and providing adult family members with tools to support their student's academic achievement, social, and emotional goals to meet the needs of the targeted students and their family. Applicants must also demonstrate extensive knowledge of current instructional strategies and programming methods for elementary and secondary students that support academic achievement, enrichment activities, youth development, and family and community engagement.



Vermont is investing \$3.4 million of its ARP funds to [support community schools](#), including community school coordinators, collaborative needs and assets assessments, and evidence-based programming. The authorizing legislation, known as the "[Community Schools Act](#)," establishes evidence-based pillars of community schools, which include "integrated student supports...[and] active family and community engagement," that "promote conditions and practices found in high-quality schools as well as address out-of-school barriers to learning." The statute also makes clear the ways these practices support the "safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environments to reinforce student success and well-being."

The grant is [currently supporting](#) five pilot community school models and 44 community partners statewide over a three-year grant period. Early examples of investments include:

- Improving the Multi-Tiered System of Supports to boost outcomes in the classroom in response to an anticipated and diverse set of needs.
- Partnering with local mental health organizations.
- Supporting the creation of learning opportunities for students and community members that address employment skills development, financial literacy, and overall well-being.
- Strengthening data teams, interventions, and effective wrap-around supports for students.



The Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

has budgeted roughly \$1.4 million of ARP funds for the [SEL Professional Learning Network \(SEL PLN\)](#), which was launched in 2022. The SEL PLN focuses on building district and educator capacity by equipping educators with trauma-informed, equitable, and culturally sustaining SEL implementation and practices.

This process began with outreach and collection of SEL points of contact for all 295 public school districts, nine educational service districts (ESDs), State Tribal Compact Schools, and charter schools. Once a lead contact for SEL was identified, the team began a comprehensive professional development [needs assessment](#). This included a district survey and multiple community listening sessions with students, families, educators, community organizations, and superintendents. A collaborative interpretation process included 28 community organization representatives along with some of the [legislatively mandated](#) SEL Advisory members. This group reviewed the Washington SEL Landscape Scan data, listening session responses, and survey results to identify the professional learning needs.

Washington is also working in partnership with [American Institutes for Research \(AIR\)](#) and [Education Northwest](#) to plan and implement webinars (including “[Engaging Students, Families, and Communities in SEL](#)”), peer-to-peer exchanges, and one-on-one district and ESD coaching to offer critical flexibility and accessibility for Washington educators. Additionally, three districts have been identified as exemplar sites to showcase practitioner-friendly vignettes describing SEL capacity-building from multiple perspectives. One of the three key learning priorities for these districts is “engaging students, families, and communities.”

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

We are encouraged by states using ARP funds to invest in SEL to improve student learning and social and emotional well-being. Research indicates:

“SEL has a powerful combination of evidence and support. These findings come from multiple fields and sources and include analyses of hundreds of studies that show SEL leads to beneficial outcomes related to social and emotional skills; attitudes about self, school, and civic engagement; social behaviors; conduct problems; emotional distress; and academic performance ([CASEL, 2022](#)).”

Additionally, cost-benefit research shows that for every dollar spent on the evidence-based SEL programs examined, there was an \$11 return on investment ([Belfield et al., 2015](#)).



SETTING AN EXAMPLE

As states and districts continue using funds to align SEL efforts across schools, families, and communities, we recommend they look to the states listed above and focus their ongoing ARP investments on the following:

- Developing and expanding Full-Service Community Schools, which incorporate pillars such as 1) integrated student supports; 2) expanded learning time and opportunities; 3) family and community engagement; and 4) collaborative leadership and practice ([Maier et al., 2017](#)), all of which help support students' mental health and social and emotional well-being (California and Vermont).
- Providing resources to families and communities to promote a stronger understanding of SEL (California, Hawai'i, and Washington).
- Conducting needs assessments that incorporate family and community voices to determine recommended SEL-related action steps (California, Vermont, and Washington).
- Developing and strengthening integrated student, family, and community supports, including through a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (Massachusetts and Vermont).
- Implementing data practices and systems that better address the social, emotional, behavioral, mental health, and wellness needs of students, families, communities, and staff (Hawai'i and Massachusetts).
- Implementing evidence-based programming that leverages family engagement as a strategy for addressing academic learning loss and the social and emotional needs of students resulting from the pandemic (Mississippi and Vermont).

Finally, CASEL offers actions that [states](#) can take to promote systemic SEL and provides extensive free resources to support [district](#) and [school](#) implementation of systemic SEL and [evidence-based programming](#).

Decades of research confirms that SEL supports academic achievement and student wellness. These innovative uses of ARP funds by states, which focus on centering student, family, and community engagement and support social and emotional wellness and academic achievement, will help demonstrate the need for ongoing investment by the federal government.



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