

Building Capacity: Region 2 Comprehensive Center Partners with Connecticut on New Social-Emotional Learning Guidelines

By Erin Browder, Ed.D.

Connecticut public schools have amplified their attention to social-emotional work for students and adults as the development of these essential skills help students reach their fullest potential and thrive. Amidst the pandemic, districts have a new comprehensive resource to support students' social-emotional learning (SEL) while setting the foundation for further academic development.

In 2021, Connecticut lawmakers passed legislation requiring SEL standards for grades 4–12. The *Components of Social, Emotional and Intellectual Habits: Grades 4 through 12* (SEIH) document is a continuation of the approved *Components of Social, Emotional and Intellectual Habits: Kindergarten through Grade 3*. Both documents represent the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that form an essential blueprint for social-emotional habits and academic success. The purpose of the document is to provide a model for districts and schools to integrate social and emotional habits into academic content areas so that students will learn essential personal life habits and educators can build a classroom and school culture where students feel safe and supported along the developmental continuum from childhood to young adulthood.

The development of the SEIH guidance was a multi-year effort, supported the Region 2 Comprehensive Center (R2CC) who provided intensive capacity building for the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE). This technical assistance offered expertise, tools, and strategic support to facilitate progress towards the final outcome to develop SEIH for school districts and staff to support the prosocial development of students in late elementary through high school. Major project milestones included creating a landscape scan of how districts already addressed students social and emotional development and convening stakeholder groups to invite input and feedback on the document.

For Erin Browder, the project lead for the R2CC team, the guiding question was, “What technical assistance can we provide to support you as the stewards of this work for the agency and state?” A critical starting point for the team was expanding the role of the comprehensive centers in building state leaders' capacity to undertake large-scale projects that will impact schools statewide. The goal of the R2CCs support was to equip the state leaders with high-quality resources and policy expertise in social, emotional, and intellectual habits to benefit districts and schools across the state. This collaborative partnership involved three key practices that can be applied to future technical assistance efforts.

Convening Multiple Perspectives

From the beginning, the project team strategically designed multiple opportunities for local partners from across different sectors and organizations to contribute to the development of the SEIH for grades 4–12. “While our group had strong expertise, we knew we didn't have all the answers nor the perspectives needed for this important task,” Browder said.

This process began with a landscape scan, in which the team sought to learn more about existing SEL programming and ground-level practices in districts, schools, and regions across the state. The district survey drew responses from 124 districts and provided insight into how schools integrated SEL into the

curriculum. The survey gave the CSDE a better understanding of what districts were doing to support staff development and how they were using data to understand students' needs and monitor progress.

The R2CC team conducted focus groups with superintendents, principals, counselors, and teachers to learn how districts approach SEL as well as the challenges they face. The landscape scan included recommendations based on the feedback districts shared with the CSDE. The survey and focus group findings led the CSDE to identify additional ways to support student social and emotional well-being across the state. This included making the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment, a universal screener that measures students' social and emotional competencies, available to districts.

The pandemic reinforced the need to provide districts with the best research in the field. The team continued to seek diverse perspectives as they drafted the SEIH. The document reflects current research and best practices across the field to indicate what students' prosocial development looks like in grades 4–12. The document provides insights into practical examples of how educators can seamlessly blend social-emotional support and the development of key intellectual habits into students' everyday classroom and school experiences. Furthermore, the R2CC and the CSDE team convened stakeholders from across the state to review the document. A synthesis of feedback responses among Connecticut administrators, teachers, parents, students, and leaders from student support services, education-related organizations, and institutes of higher education revealed widespread support for the *SEIH: Grades 4 through 12*. Additionally, the CSDE actively engaged key stakeholders, including national experts, during the development process; the R2CC team played a valuable role in providing feedback and guidance throughout the process.

Working Smarter Not Harder

In addition to facilitating the ongoing exchanges within the team and with outside partners, the R2CC team supported the CSDE by offering and strategically using tools and resources to document planning steps and actions. The project team developed a theory of action and designed timelines and roadmaps to meet significant outcomes on time. Throughout meetings, the planning tools were used to monitor progress and identify necessary course corrections.

When the pandemic hit, the commitment to stay on track was critical. In spring 2020, as officials began planning for a fall reopening of schools, the R2CC team helped CSDE respond to the unprecedented crisis by developing brief guidance documents for how educators and mental health providers could nurture their own well-being so they could support students' mental health. These resources were especially useful as schools reopened. The work on the new SEIH for grades 4 through 12 never stopped—a testament to the team's ability to not lose sight of its mission.

Making Time for Reflection

Our team built shared understanding and language by regularly allowing processing time when introducing new ideas and pausing for reflection as a team. As external support providers, the R2CC team made time to learn about the local context and dynamics to ensure that technical support was relevant and consistent with prior agency efforts.

These reflection opportunities were especially important because the project involved multiple divisions of the department. The two primary leaders who developed the SEIH document were Kim Traverso, who

leads the agency's efforts in SEL and behavioral health and school counseling and postsecondary readiness, and Joanne White, who leads agency efforts in English language arts (ELA).

"Genuine connection came from getting to know each other, tapping into the range of expertise and experience, and leveraging it in our work is a delicate practice," Browder said. "These practices paid dividends for future work and action planning as we calibrated around our focus and strategy."

Because the R2CC also works with state education agencies in New York and Rhode Island, Browder said the team was able to provide perspectives from those states that Connecticut found insightful. The project team actively engaged other states and key education partners, including national experts, during the development process. The project team regularly debriefed after accomplishing key milestones, which included discussions about outcomes and the overall process.

Next Steps

In the next phase of the project, R2CC will support CSDE in creating SEIH dissemination and implementation communication documents for the districts. Additionally, the project team plans to update the current version of kindergarten through grade 3 document.

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