



# A Comprehensive Framework for Advancing Social and Emotional Learning Efforts

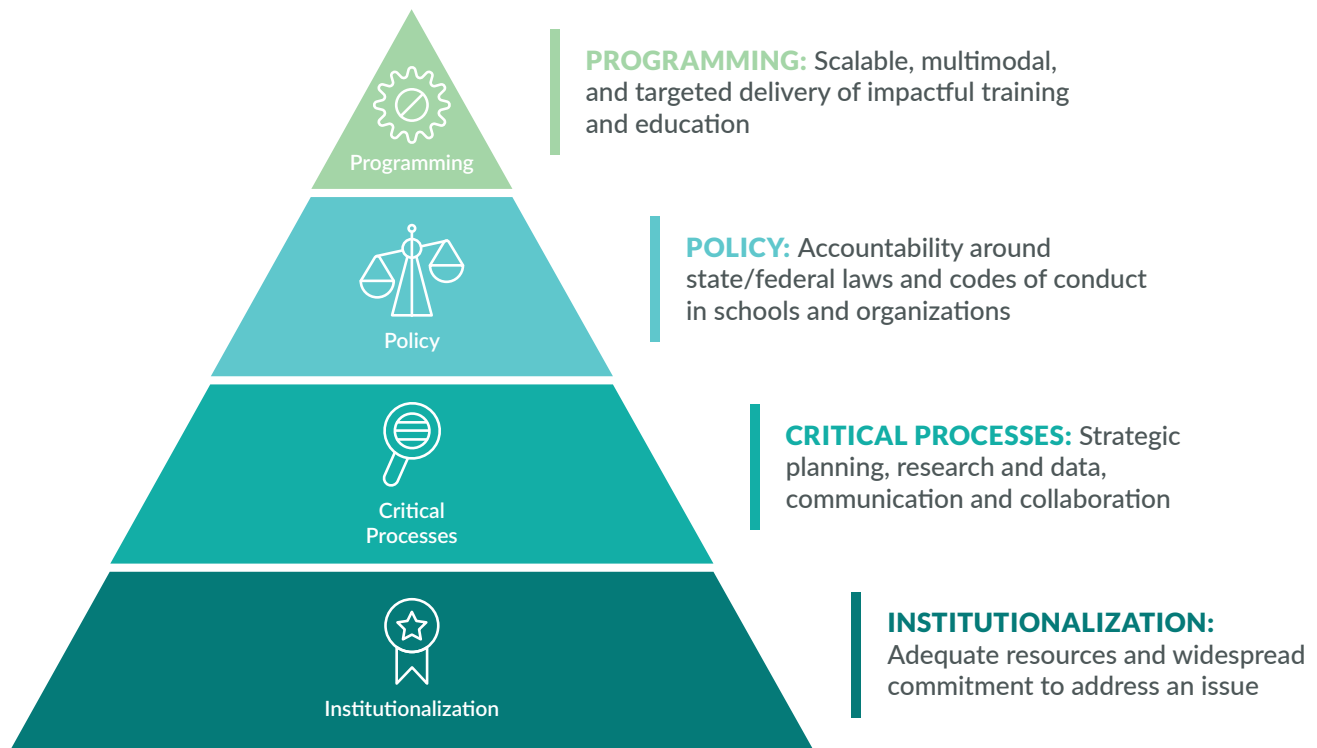


# Introduction

Educational communities across the country are facing an inflection point regarding the critical health, wellness, and safety issues impacting their students: in particular, mental health, bullying, and navigating social and online challenges. There is unprecedented accountability for leaders at all levels of educational systems to do more and better work to get ahead of these challenges, underscoring the need for a system-wide approach to social and emotional learning.

To that end, EVERFI has developed a research-backed, public health framework to drive individual and institutional impact. This approach centers around four critical components of a comprehensive strategy: programming, policies, critical processes, and institutionalization. Viewed as a pyramid, each of these components relies upon the foundational elements below and supports the elements above.

**Figure 1. The EVERFI Impact Framework**



This framework is a powerful tool that can enable educational communities to better engage in the comprehensive and strategic approach necessary to make a transformative impact-- both on it's students, and on it's community.



# Programming

Programming is one of the elements of a SEL strategy that is most familiar and which most districts already have in place to some degree. The most common type of programming is curricular infusion and training that students, staff, and faculty are either encouraged or required to complete.

Programming allows a school system to broadly and efficiently disseminate critical information in a consistent manner regarding core concepts, critical skills, laws and policies, and available resources.

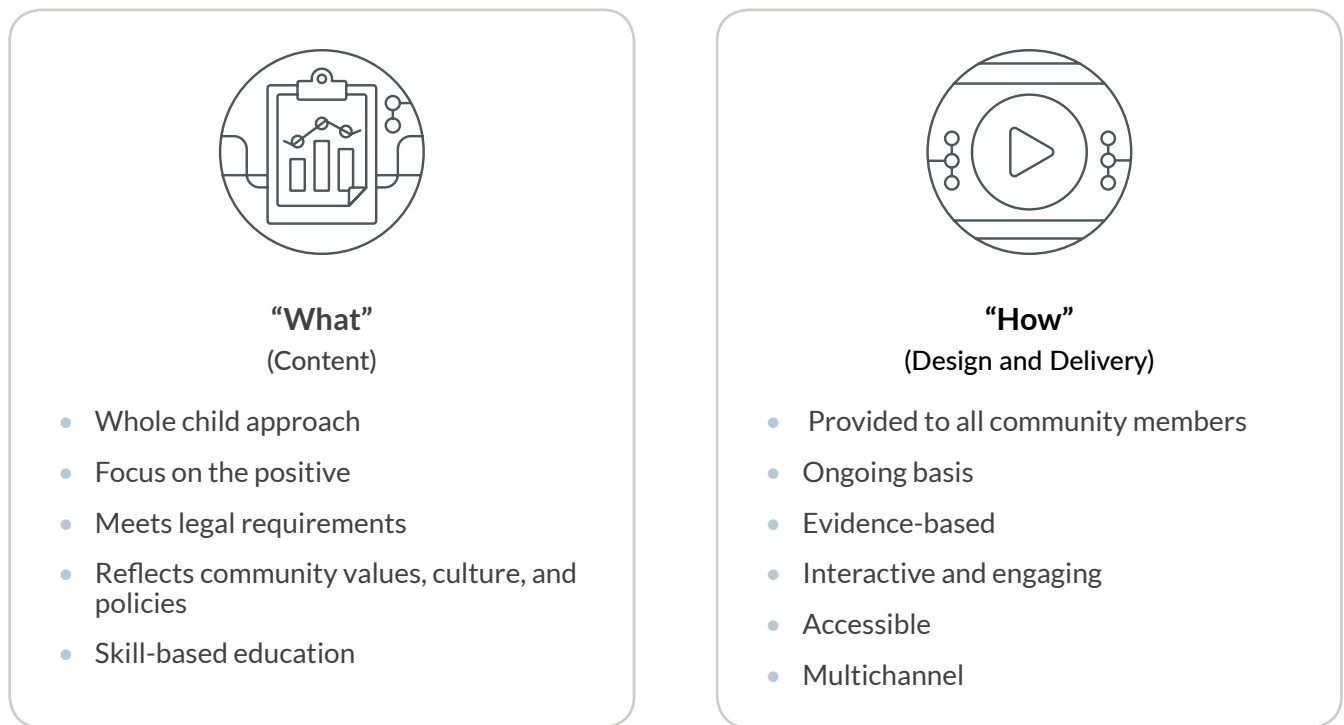
But if programming is delivered only to a subset of the population on an infrequent basis, or is simply designed to meet mandated requirements, it misses a tremendous opportunity for impact. Indeed, programming requires significant time and resources, but these investments in safety and wellbeing can have huge returns on student success.

Research- and evidence-based best practices indicate that programming must be continuous and population-level to truly effect change. Programs cannot be a one-and-done event; ongoing educational opportunities presenting new topics in new ways is needed. This cadence helps reinforce learning and allows students to build new skills critical to a lasting impact.

In terms of content, if a district's goal is to *prevent* conduct that puts a student or their peers at risk, contributes to decreased safety, or goes against community values or policies, programming should not simply define the rules and provide examples of the most egregious behaviors. This places focus on what not to do and negative consequences that are to be avoided. Rather, the messaging must reflect the positive outcomes a school or district is trying to achieve. Specifically, effective programming focuses on the organization's values and culture and encourages community members to act in a way that is aligned with, and supports, those values and that healthy culture. Research has indicated that using this type of positive, values-based approach can be far more effective in shaping behavior than a consequence-avoidance or risk reduction focus. Well-designed training should also provide real-time skill building and development, enabling learners to practice and master key skills and competencies.

Finally, to maximize impact, training can and should be complemented by other programming activities and initiatives. These could include messaging campaigns or town hall meetings with open discussions of key issues. Ensuring that the school or district engages in ongoing communication about a critical issue through multiple channels not only keeps that issue top of mind for all, but also demonstrates top-level commitment - another key component of a comprehensive SEL strategy.

**Figure 2. The “What” and “How” of Effective Programming**



## Policy

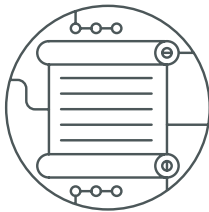
Out of necessity for compliance with federal, local, and national mandates, many school districts adhere to specific policies designed to improve the safety and well-being of their student populations. Often, SEL programming is used to bring these written policies to life, ensuring understanding through classroom lessons or ongoing school or district-wide efforts. Programming also provides a vehicle for additional, repeated communication about policy to ensure that all students and staff understand the expectations of their community.

Policies convey a district’s conduct expectations regarding issues of importance such as bullying, safety, procedures for reporting incidents, and mechanisms for supporting student well-being. Like programming, they are also critical components of a district’s legal compliance and risk management efforts. The very fact that a set of expectations and values around a particular issue are documented in writing demonstrates a degree of institutional priority and facilitates a heightened awareness among members of the community about that issue.



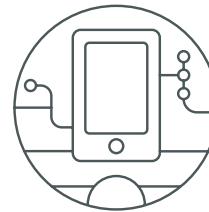
Given their importance, policies must be drafted thoughtfully and inclusively. Schools and school districts interested in moving the needle on student safety and well-being must not only ensure that policies reflect applicable legal standards, but also expectations for behavior that go above and beyond minimum regulatory requirements. Policies must contain a description of the consequences that may result from their violation, but they also can—and should—echo those positive values and behaviors that the community seeks to reinforce. A set of procedures should be documented that provides multiple channels for reporting possible violations, as well as how such reports will be objectively investigated, adjudicated, and enforced.

**Figure 3. Effective Policies**



**Contents:**

- Applicable legal requirements
- Prohibited behaviors
- Positive conduct expectations
- Consequences for violation
- Multiple reporting channels
- Investigation/enforcement procedures
- Non-retaliation for good faith reports



**Communication:**

- Disseminated repeatedly
- Accessible at all times
- Included in educational programming
- Acknowledged by all community members

Every district must also ensure that they have an overarching, strict non-retaliation policy in place, ensuring that individuals who report concerns about policy violations or lack of enforcement are protected from reprisal. Amnesty or Good Samaritan Policies can also help overcome reporting barriers when certain issues are involved.

Finally, it is critical that schools and school districts communicate broadly about their policies, ensure that they are always accessible, and confirm that every community member reads, understands, and agrees to adhere to them.

There is a vast difference between basic, check-the-box compliance policies and those policies that become part of the ethos of a school community.



Requiring students (when age-appropriate), parents, and staff to sign a policy acknowledgment is a common method for ensuring that they are aware of what is expected of them. This policy review and acknowledgment process should occur at regular intervals, such as in conjunction with policy-related training.

It is important to note that the contents of policies, how top of mind they are for students, parents, and staff, and how they are enforced all contribute to the establishment and reinforcement of a school's norms and culture. There is a vast difference between basic, check-the-box compliance policies that are viewed simply as outdated pages in a handbook, for example, and those policies that become part of the fabric of a school's behavior and ethos through frequent communication, regular training, and consistent, meaningful enforcement. Indeed, when policies are not consistently followed or appropriately enforced, they not only become ineffective in and of themselves, but the inconsistency in their application also can cause significant harm to the school's broader culture.

## Critical Processes



To be effective, policies and programming cannot be developed and implemented in a vacuum. Rather, SEL work should be developed through rigorous intentionality and robust planning--and be continuously informed by current community data.

In practical terms, this means that schools and school districts should utilize the same business-related processes they use to plan and launch a new academic program, for example, in their SEL efforts: strategic planning, goal setting, and post-launch measurement.

Thus, the effort to create a comprehensive prevention strategy starts with the following questions:

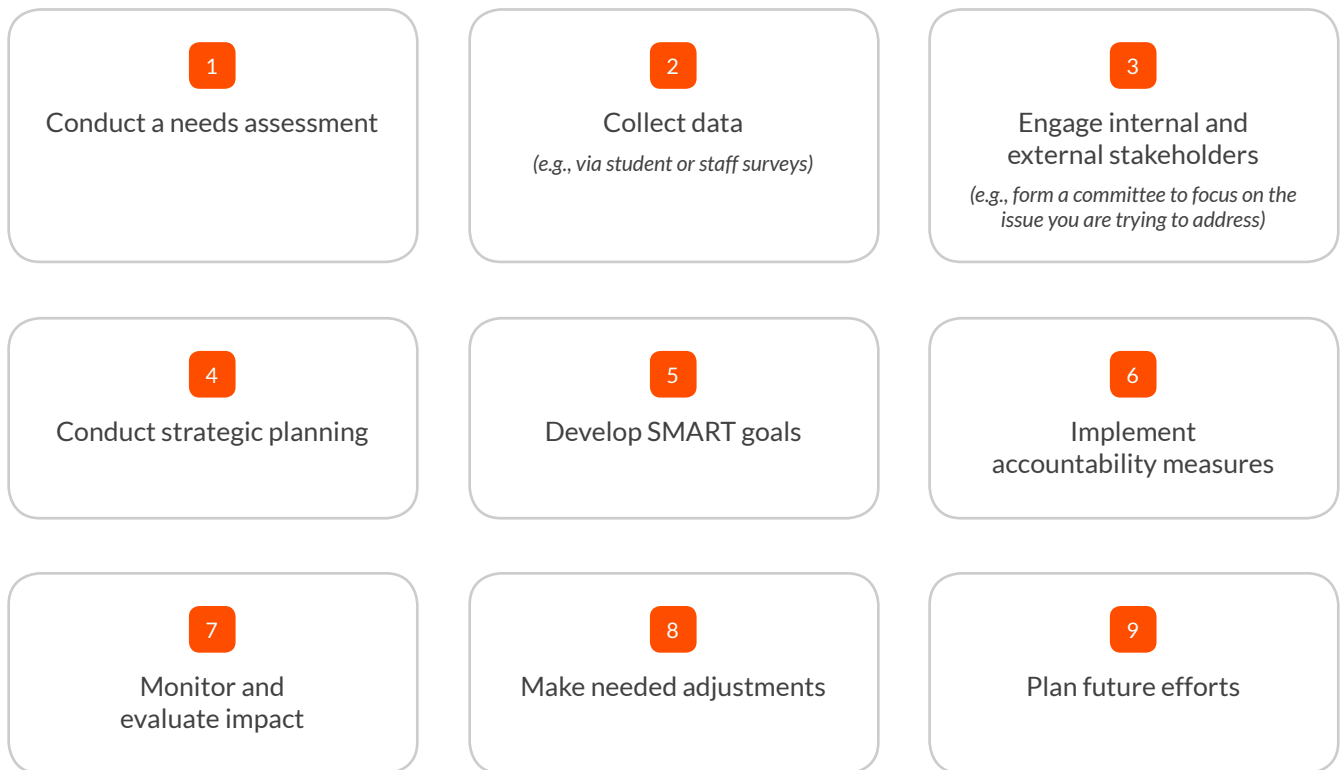
- 1 *What problem are we trying to solve? Why does it matter to our school community?*
- 2 *Why does it matter to our students?*
- 3 *What data do we currently have about this issue? What data do we need?*
- 4 *What are the unique opportunities and strengths of our school in this area? What are the risks of not acting?*
- 5 *Who are the internal (and possibly external) stakeholders we need to engage?*
- 6 *What SEL approaches have been shown to be effective?*
- 7 *How invested are we currently, and what additional resources are needed?*

By conducting this type of needs assessment, or an evaluation of strengths and opportunities for improvement, schools can get a clearer sense of what—and who—needs to be addressed in their SEL efforts, and tailor their strategy accordingly.

SMART goals (i.e., Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely), along with supporting objectives and milestones, should be drafted regarding needed programs and policies; these, of course, must be informed by current data and the inputs of key stakeholders.

In addition, data must be collected and used on an ongoing basis to evaluate the impact of programs and policies post-implementation, inform any needed adjustments, and guide future efforts. Some of the ways to collect such data include student or parent surveys, engagement surveys of educators, climate surveys, program assessments, focus groups, and, if being used, data from online student courses.

**Figure 4: Using Critical Processes in SEL Work**



By employing these types of critical processes, SEL programming and policies related to student well-being can be truly effective.



# Institutionalization

Institutionalization is the base of the framework, supporting critical processes, policies, and programming. Simply put, institutionalization means that a school and/or district has made SEL a system-wide priority. A strong commitment to SEL is woven into the very fabric of the school, from the bottom to the top.

Given the influence and decision-making power of senior leaders, the importance of gaining meaningful—and visible—buy-in from the highest levels of leadership is critical to institutionalization and the success of a school’s prevention efforts. But simply getting leaders on board with the idea of SEL practices is not enough. Their commitment must result in demonstrable investment in effective initiatives with a focus on proactively supporting student health and safety.

The following chart outlines a list of criteria which are hallmarks of system-wide commitment and investment:

## Figure 5: Achieving Institutionalization

- Integrating leadership-led SEL messages into a variety of school and district-wide communications
- Including SEL and/or “soft skills” work in strategic plans and department goals
- Budgeting sufficient, recurring funding for SEL initiatives
- Dedicating an appropriate number of staff or staff hours to SEL work and issues related to it (mental health, student well-being, health promotion)

Even in lean financial times, prioritizing student well-being is worth the investment. Research has shown that a focus on whole child education can contribute to increases in student confidence, academic achievement<sup>1</sup>, and decreases in truancy—directly tying back to the mission of most educational systems<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Berkowitz, R., Moore, H., Astor, R. A., & Benbenishty, R. (2016). A research synthesis of the associations between socioeconomic background, inequality, school climate, and academic achievement. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(2), 425–469; Wang, M-T., & Degol, J. L. (2016). School climate: A review of the construct, measurement, and impact on student outcomes. *Educational Psychology Review*, 28(2), 315–352.

<sup>2</sup>Schanzenbach, D. W., Bauer, L., & Mumford, M. (2016). Lessons for broadening school accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act. The Hamilton Project, Brookings. [http://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/files/lessons\\_broadening\\_school\\_accountability\\_essa.pdf](http://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/files/lessons_broadening_school_accountability_essa.pdf)



## Conclusion

Developing a comprehensive SEL strategy to address student health, wellness, and safety challenges is not an easy process, and it requires a shifting of focus from response-based approaches to more upstream initiatives. But if schools and school districts truly want to educate the whole child—and reap the rewards of a healthy, thriving community—they need a robust, coordinated plan that focuses holistically on student well-being. By prioritizing student wellness alongside academic success, schools and districts will be able to integrate and benefit from the proven merits of both.

## About the Author

Erin McClintock, M.Ed. serves as EVERFI’s Head of Impact for Social and Emotional Learning. In her role, Erin analyzes the intersections that exist between diversity, equity, and inclusion, mental health, character, digital wellness, and substance abuse, and identifies ways in which strategic planning, systems, policies, practices, and people can manifest change to make an upstream impact on the collective betterment of our world. Erin holds a graduate degree in Counseling Psychology, completed her post-masters studies in Trauma and Addiction Counseling, and has extensive experience in community, school, and collegiate mental health.



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*This guidebook was adapted from “The CPN Framework for Comprehensive Prevention”*



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