Excellence Through Social Emotional Learning (exSEL) Network

School Year 2020-2021

Request for Applications

Submit by **April 17, 2020**

Introduction to the exSEL Network

The Excellence through Social Emotional Learning (exSEL) Network is seeking school districts across Massachusetts to join a collaborative network designed to increase participants' capacity to improve social-emotional learning and build more supportive learning environments in schools. This project is premised on the understanding that success in school and life depends on more than academic ability alone. Research has shown that social-emotional skills have a significant impact on students' academic performance and persistence in school, as well as their lifelong health, wealth, and well-being[1].

The exSEL Network—and its partners the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy (Rennie) and Transforming Education (TransformEd)—works with district teams to build knowledge and understanding of how effective implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) can positively impact students' learning and behavioral outcomes. Participants gain critical insight on how best to support the development of specific social-emotional skills and mindsets through changes in policies and practice at the district, school, and classroom levels. We anticipate that districts working with the exSEL Network will serve as a model for other districts and the state of Massachusetts on supporting whole-child and SEL development now and in the future.

The exSEL Network has been supporting districts in Massachusetts since 2016. To date, 32 districts have participated in our in-person convenings and have joined together to advance social-emotional learning throughout the Commonwealth. For more information about the history of the exSEL Network, please see Appendix A.

Benefits of Joining the exSEL Network

For the 2020-21 school year, TransformEd and Rennie will facilitate learning among several cohorts of districts. Those new to exSEL will comprise the **Learning Network**, a group of up to ten districts, contingent on interest and demand. (Returning exSEL districts should see Appendix B for more details.)

There are several benefits to participating in the Learning Network. Participants will:
- Increase their understanding of relevant research and best practices related to SEL,
- Build their capacity to guide the development of students' social-emotional skills within a positive learning environment,
- Gain access to local and national subject matter experts, and
- Join a community of educators who support each other's systemic and practice shifts.

Participants who join the Learning Network will increase their understanding of the importance of individual social-emotional competencies; how these competencies are defined; why they matter for student academic, behavior, and life outcomes; and what research-based strategies are known to support the development of these competencies. Network participants will also assess their individual district needs, map the resources and supports needed to foster social-emotional development in students and adults, and identify the systemic structures, processes, and policies that can sustain effective SEL practices over time.

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[1] For more information on the longitudinal research base showing the impact of social-emotional competencies on students' outcomes, see Chris Gabrieli, Dana Ansel, and Sara Bartolino Krachman, "Ready to Be Counted: The Research Case for Education Policy Action on Non-Cognitive Skills," December 2015, http://www.transformingeducation.org/s/ReadytoBe-Counted_Release.pdf

The exSEL Learning Network is comprised of five full-day, in-person convenings during the school year, including the Statewide SEL Conference in May 2021 that will be open to educators across the state; three virtual webinars; three district-level coaching touchpoints to support ongoing work in between convenings; and ongoing network communication via post-convening newsletters. For a full list of network touchpoints, see the table below:

exSEL Network 2020-2021 -- LEARNING NETWORK		
Event	**Month & Year**	**Description**
Kick-off Call	September	Virtual meeting to introduce the year and answer questions
Convening	October	Full-day, interactive PD and best practice sharing
Coaching Support	October - November	Individual call with team lead to support ongoing work
Webinar	November	Virtual session open to all exSEL Network participants
Convening	December	Full-day, interactive PD and best practice sharing
Coaching Support	December - January	Individual call with team lead to support ongoing work
Webinar	January	Virtual session open to all exSEL Network participants
Convening	February	Full-day, interactive PD and best practice sharing
Coaching Support	February - March	Individual call with team lead to support ongoing work
Webinar	March	Virtual session open to all exSEL Network participants
Convening	April	Full-day, interactive PD and best practice sharing
Conference	May	Statewide conference focused on a variety of SEL topics, open to all schools across MA

Forming an exSEL Team

The exSEL planning team has learned from years of facilitating the Network that teams are most effective when team composition is consistent across the entire year and when the team is comprised of people from diverse roles across the district. Thus, we ask that districts make an effort to form teams that meet the following criteria.
- Teams should ideally be comprised of more than five people.
- Teams should be representative of a variety of school community stakeholders.
    - This may include roles such as central office administrators, school committee members, school leaders, teachers, counselors, families, students, and union representatives.
    - Diverse team composition is critical because it helps participants understand social-emotional learning from the classroom, school, and district levels, and it also means that teams will be able to include a range of perspectives in any decision-making that might occur over the course of the year.
    - At a minimum, it is strongly recommended that at least one teacher, one principal, and one administrator with decision-making authority be included on the exSEL team.
- Teams should aim to reflect the demographics of the community and embrace a diversity of opinions in their work.
- Teams should aim to send a consistent set of members to all convenings, whenever possible.
- Teams should each have a team lead who will serve as the primary point of contact for the exSEL Network and will coordinate internal logistics and attendance with their respective district team members. Team leaders can be determined at the start of the new school year if needed.

Request for Applications

1. **Selection Criteria**
    a. The exSEL Network seeks to engage a diverse range of districts and schools with respect to size, geography, student demographics, and other factors.
    b. All districts and schools are welcome to apply if they:
        i. are located in Massachusetts;
        ii. can commit to an engagement of at least one year; and
        iii. are focused on improving social-emotional skills among ALL students in their district (e.g., not solely a single subgroup of students).

2. **Instructions**
    a. Interested districts should submit a proposal by following this link:
    http://bit.ly/exSELRFA2020-21
    b. The application invites districts to submit the following information:
        i. Introduction
            1. Include at least one district contact person—name, phone, and email address—for all communications related to the application.
        ii. Background
            1. Provide a short description of the district, such as its size, demographics, number of schools, academic performance, and any additional context.
        iii. Brief description of *current* efforts to improve SEL in district

1. Clarify what the district hopes to achieve by focusing on SEL.
2. Provide an overview of the current efforts to improve SEL at the classroom, school, and/or district levels (e.g., use of a curriculum, training programs, professional development efforts in areas like trauma, growth mindset, self-regulation, PBIS, etc.).
3. Assess strengths and areas of opportunity in the district's current work.

    iv.   Future outcomes

1. State three outcomes the district hopes to achieve through participating in exSEL in the 2020-2021 school year. Consider the district's priorities around planning, implementation, and assessment (e.g., learning more about particular competencies, rolling out a district-wide SEL assessment, training on SEL classroom practices for middle school, etc.)

    v.   exSEL Team members

1. Propose a list of at least five staff members (including name and title/role) the district intends to include on the SEL team. See "Forming an exSEL Team" section above for recommendations.

3. Cost

   a. The cost for a district to participate in the exSEL Learning Network is **$12,000.**

      i. This covers the cost of convenings for the full year (i.e., facilitators and presenters, materials, location and food costs) and attendance to the exSEL Statewide Conference for a team of **up to 12 people**.

   b. In addition to local funding or any other available sources (e.g., private grants or foundation funding, etc.), interested districts may wish to consider federal and state funding sources that could potentially be used to support participation in exSEL. Depending on locally identified needs, goals, and priorities, these funds might include those that support educator professional development, well-rounded educational opportunities, and safe and supportive learning environments (which could include federally-funded Title II-A, Title IV-A, and IDEA Making Money Matter M3 funding; and state-funded safe and supportive schools grants). If you have any questions about the appropriate use of these funds, please contact the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (via the grant leads or achievement@doe.mass.edu).

4. Timeline

   a. The full application must be submitted online by April 17, 2020, at 5:00pm ET to be considered for priority round 1.

   b. Priority round 1 applicants will receive notification of their status by April 30, 2020.

   c. Shortly thereafter, network participants will receive an MOU to confirm their participation as well as a more detailed proposed scope of work and timeline.

Summary of Key Steps in Application Process

Application Steps	Deadlines	Notes
District Application	April 17, 2020 by 5:00pm ET	Submit via online form

| Notification of Application Status | April 30, 2020 | Email sent from exSEL team |

APPENDIX A

History of the exSEL Network

- **2016:** The statewide associations of Massachusetts school committees, superintendents, principals and education collaboratives came together to form a first-of-its-kind collaboration to advocate for SEL in schools. This coalition, called Excellence through Social Emotional Learning (exSEL), partnered with the Rennie Center and Transforming Education in 2017 to launch a network.
- **2017-2018:** Nine Massachusetts districts came together to form the first exSEL Network cohort. Together, they engaged in a planning process to assess their readiness to operationalize SEL. They gained greater awareness of what it takes to integrate SEL into daily practice, developed preliminary integration plans, and examined strategies for measuring SEL outcomes. The first year of exSEL illuminated a multitude of learnings about districts' wide array of SEL-related needs. Furthermore, districts articulated a strong desire to access deeper knowledge and more customized assistance around specific SEL competencies, resources, and measurement tools.
- **2018-2019:** During this year, the exSEL Network more than doubled in size. Nineteen Massachusetts districts participated in a structured Learning Community to obtain deeper content knowledge and interactive professional development around the strategies and learning environments that support students' social-emotional development. Some districts also participated in an optional Data Inquiry & Action Cohort and received individualized support on how to use data to inform SEL.
- **2019-2020:** The exSEL Network expanded once again to serve three distinct cohorts supporting 17 total districts. Districts in the Learning Cohort gained greater awareness of what it takes to integrate SEL into daily practice, developed preliminary integration plans, and examined strategies for measuring SEL outcomes. Several returning districts opted into a cohort focused on developing an SEL Blueprint, working to develop a district-wide plan to improve SEL practices and outcomes. Several other returning districts participated in a cohort focused on embedding SEL in the classroom, focusing on integrating SEL into the physical space and into instruction.

APPENDIX B

Information for Returning Districts

- Returning districts who have participated in the exSEL Network for one year or more are invited to join our **Launching Network**. This network offers districts a collaborative environment in which to delve deeper into a specific topic around SEL. Returning districts are invited to join one of several cohorts, each with its own area of focus.
- The Request for Applications (RFA) for the Launching Network will be released at a later date in Spring 2020 through established network communications. Please reach out to the exSEL team directly if you have questions about the Launching Network.