



Excellence Through Social Emotional Learning (exSEL) Network

School Year 2020-2021

[Request for Applications](#)



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-being¹.

During the 2020-2021 school year, schools will continue to face the unprecedented challenge of educating all students through the COVID-19 pandemic. Our educators have done extraordinary and inspiring work to respond to the myriad needs of students and their families while navigating this uncharted territory. Now more than ever, providing a robust and systemic approach to SEL is a central focus for schools and districts. The exSEL Network is designed to support this crucial work, offering rich professional development experiences and ongoing opportunities to learn with and from colleagues in other district teams across the Commonwealth.

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, with particular emphasis this year on adapting to the challenges posed by COVID-19. From constructively integrating SEL practices into virtual instruction, to creating safe and trauma-sensitive learning environments, to supporting staff health and well-being, exSEL Network participants will engage with the most pressing aspects of building an effective SEL approach in these uncertain circumstances. 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 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 have worked to recalibrate the exSEL Network's structure and schedule of activities. Based on feedback from current exSEL district teams, the 2020-21 exSEL Network is designed to increase direct support via monthly coaching calls with individual district teams, while preserving invaluable opportunities to connect across districts and learn from each other.

There are several benefits to participating in the exSEL Network. Participants will:

- Increase their understanding of relevant research and best practices related to SEL, including emergent resources to support educators in a COVID-19 world,

¹ For more information on the importances of social-emotional learning, see "From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope" by The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (NCSEAD) at <http://nationathope.org/report-from-the-nation/>.

- 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, with particular emphasis on adapting to meet the many needs of students and families navigating the complex effects of COVID-19.

Participants who join the exSEL Network will increase their understanding of the importance of individual social-emotional competencies; how these competencies are defined; why they matter for students' 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.

The exSEL Network combines shared professional learning experiences with regular, individualized support for teams working to improve SEL systems and practices in their district. Beginning with virtual launch events in the summer and fall, participants will access monthly network-wide virtual² sessions designed to learn with and from district teams across the state. Monthly network sessions will range from 60-90 minutes. District teams will also partake in monthly coaching calls for individualized consultation and support, each of which will be up to one hour depending on district needs. Finally, the year will conclude with a statewide SEL Summit for educators across the Commonwealth, to showcase teams' work and learn from local and national SEL experts³. For more information, refer to the Program Overview and Calendar of Activities below.

exSEL Network 2020-2021 <i>Program Overview</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Summer virtual kickoff session for district team leads ● Fall virtual launch event for full network ● Monthly virtual coaching calls with individual district teams ● Monthly network-wide virtual events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Webinars led by exSEL planning team ○ Peer sharing calls led by district team leads ● Spring statewide end-of-year SEL Summit

² Please note: the focus on virtual programming is in response to COVID-19. We will continue to assess program structure to best support participants as more information about and guidance on the pandemic is made available.

³ Please note: the current plan is to host the statewide SEL Summit *in-person* in May 2021. This will, of course, depend on the status of the COVID-19 pandemic at that time. Our top priority is the safety and well-being of participants, and we will make decisions about exSEL network activities accordingly.

exSEL Network 2020-2021 Calendar of Activities			
Event	Month	Description	Who
Team Lead Summer Kick-off	Aug 2020	Virtual meeting to introduce the year, address current COVID circumstances and answer questions	District Team Leads
Network Launch	Sep 2020	Virtual kick-off PD session to introduce the network, explore district SEL practices and set team learning goals	Whole Network
District Touchpoint	Oct 2020	Monthly virtual coaching call for individual districts	Team lead or whole district team
Network Event	Oct 2020	Webinar led by exSEL Planning team	Whole Network
District Touchpoint	Nov 2020	Monthly virtual coaching call for individual districts	Team lead or whole district team
Network Event	Nov 2020	Peer sharing session led by district team leads	Whole Network
District Touchpoint	Dec 2020	Monthly virtual coaching call for individual districts	Team lead or whole district team
Network Event	Dec 2020	Webinar led by exSEL Planning team	Whole Network
District Touchpoint	Jan 2021	Monthly virtual coaching call for individual districts	Team lead or whole district team
Network Event	Jan 2021	Peer sharing session led by district team leads	Whole Network
District Touchpoint	Feb 2021	Monthly virtual coaching call for individual districts	Team lead or whole district team
Network Event	Feb 2021	Webinar led by exSEL Planning team	Whole Network
District Touchpoint	Mar 2021	Monthly virtual coaching call for individual districts	Team lead or whole district team
Network Event	Mar 2021	Peer sharing session led by district team leads	Whole Network
District Touchpoint	Apr 2021	Monthly virtual coaching call for individual districts	Team lead or whole district team
Network Event	Apr 2021	Webinar led by exSEL Planning team	Whole Network
exSEL Summit	May 2021	Statewide conference focused on a variety of SEL topics	Whole Network & 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 composed 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 composed 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

The exSEL Network seeks to engage a diverse range of districts and schools with respect to size, geography, student demographics, and other factors. All districts and schools are welcome to apply if they:

- a. are located in Massachusetts;
- b. can commit to an engagement of at least one year; and
- c. are focused on improving social-emotional skills among ALL students in their district (e.g., not solely a single subgroup of students).

2. Instructions

Interested districts who are *new to the exSEL network* should submit a proposal by following this link: <http://bit.ly/exSELRFA2020-21>. *Returning* exSEL teams who plan to join exSEL again for the 2020-2021 school year should submit the brief interest form that was emailed to them.

The application invites districts to submit the following information:

- a. *Introduction* -- Include at least one district contact person—name, phone, and email address—for all communications related to the application.
- b. *Background* -- Provide a short description of the district, such as its size, demographics, number of schools, academic performance, and any additional context.

- c. Brief description of *current efforts* to improve SEL in district --
- i. Clarify what the district hopes to achieve by focusing on SEL.
 - ii. 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.).
 - iii. Assess strengths and areas of opportunity in the district's current work.
- d. *Future outcomes* -- 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.)
- e. *exSEL Team members* -- 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

The cost for a district to participate in the exSEL Network is **\$10,000**. 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 10 people**.

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

The full application should be submitted online by **June 30, 2020, at 5:00pm ET** to be considered for priority round 1. Priority round 1 applicants will receive notification of their status by July 15, 2020. Shortly thereafter, network participants will receive an MOU to confirm participation.

Questions?

If you have any questions about this application, please do not hesitate to reach out to us at exselnetwork@gmail.com -- we're here to help!

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.