



California  
Center for  
School Climate



AUDIO GALLERY

## The California Center for School Climate

EDUCATOR SPOTLIGHTS

This is Part 1 of a two-part brief designed to capture insights from educators' experiences in schools. Through our programming, the California Center for School Climate (CCSC) team seeks to highlight and build upon the successes, challenges, and recommendations discussed in the educator audiocast series.

This audio gallery is a product of the CCSC, a California Department of Education initiative operated by WestEd that provides free support and trainings on school climate and data use to local education agencies in California. Learn more about this work and listen to all the audiocasts in this series at [ccsc-gallery.wested.org](https://ccsc-gallery.wested.org).



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## PRIORITIZING SCHOOLWIDE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR STAFF AND STUDENT WELL-BEING

Since the California Center for School Climate (CCSC) launched in January 2022, one of its core principles has been that partnering with students, educators, caregivers, and community partners is a crucial component to creating safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments. At the end of the 2023 school year, the CCSC Audio Gallery Team sent out a call for nominations for educators and school site staff members committed to cultivating positive school climates across California. Nominees were then chosen to be a part of group discussions with school-based staff with similar roles and approaches.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is defined as the process through which people develop healthy identities, manage emotions, activate empathy for others, establish and maintain relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with a renewed nationwide focus on racial injustice led to an increase in the adoption of SEL programs in schools. These programs aim to support students' mental health and well-being, social and emotional development, and experiences of inclusion and belonging.<sup>2</sup>

The research on the positive effects of SEL is clear—students participating in SEL programs show significantly more positive outcomes with respect to enhanced SEL skills, attitudes, and positive social behavior and lower levels of emotional distress and behavioral problems.<sup>3</sup> These skill sets are especially important in helping students navigate and understand their place in the world. Furthermore, SEL has a positive impact on students' academic achievement. For instance, one study found that SEL interventions increased students' academic performance by 11 percentage points when compared to students who did not participate.<sup>4</sup>

## Learning From High School Staff Committed to Social-Emotional Learning

In part 1 of our educator audiocast series, we spoke to two staff members about their experiences implementing SEL through classroom and schoolwide practices. SEL adoption tends to focus on three areas: developing students' SEL competencies, embedding SEL into classroom instruction, and creating schoolwide programs and practices.<sup>5</sup> SEL counselor Carla Montes and activities director and health teacher Lisa Bowdoin both work to support students' social and emotional well-being through schoolwide programs and practices at their respective high schools. Although they play different roles, Carla and Lisa agree that SEL education is especially important for high school students as they navigate the developmental challenges of adolescence and begin to make sense of themselves in relationship to others and the world.

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*"If you don't have social skills, if you don't know how to communicate, if you aren't good at building relationships with people or making smart choices, how successful can you really be?"*

**—Carla Montes**

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As one of two SEL counselors, Carla began a new initiative at Lompoc High School in Lompoc, California: offering several counseling groups on a range of topics (such as anxiety, stress management, and building positive self-esteem) based on the needs and desires expressed by students. The counseling groups have been so popular with students that the school has created a waiting list. Carla has collected data suggesting that the counseling groups have an

immediate positive impact on students' GPAs and attendance rates. In addition to the counseling groups, Carla helps facilitate conflict-mediation sessions and restorative meetings between teachers and students. These groups all take place in Lompoc High School's newly opened Wellness Center, which is also where students can access individual counseling sessions and hang out during lunch.

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*"We teach our classroom expectations, but we're allowed to laugh. We're allowed for [students] to know that we're human."*

**—Lisa Bowdoin**

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Lisa brings a similar focus on relationship-building to her schoolwide SEL work. As the activities director and health teacher at Duarte High School in Duarte, California, Lisa works to ensure staff members and students receive a warm welcome upon their return to campus after the summer break. By offering simple, clear community-building structures for teachers to use during the first week of class, Lisa helps her staff members set the tone with a focus on relationships. Lisa also collaborates with external community partners throughout the year to support staff and student social and emotional well-being.

Lisa and Carla's conversation highlights the power of a schoolwide commitment to SEL to build relationships, increase students' sense of belonging, and positively impact school culture and climate.



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### ***Consider while you listen . . .***

Both Lisa and Carla shared reflections on how their personal experiences in school helped them see the benefits of focusing on students' SEL skills and well-being. **How have your own educational experiences had an impact on your work?**

**What programs and structures exist at your school or district to support students' social and emotional well-being? What about staff members' social and emotional well-being?**

Carla speaks to the importance of collecting quantitative data to show the impact of SEL programs. **What kinds of data does your school or district already collect about SEL programs or skills? What other data might you want to collect?**

Lisa described the different structures and supports she offers her staff members at the beginning of the year to center relationship-building with and between students. **How does your school or district work to cultivate community throughout the school year, both for staff members and for students?**

## **References**

- <sup>1</sup> CASEL. (n.d.). *Fundamentals of SEL*. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>
- <sup>2</sup> Bryant, G., Mainelli, A., Crowley, S., Glennen, C., & Edzie, K. (2021, October). *Finding your place 2021: Social emotional learning takes center stage in K-12*. Tyton Partners. [https://d1hzkn4d3dn6lg.cloudfront.net/production/uploads/2021/10/Tyton-Partners\\_Finding-Your-Place-2021\\_SEL-Takes-Center-Stage-in-K12.pdf](https://d1hzkn4d3dn6lg.cloudfront.net/production/uploads/2021/10/Tyton-Partners_Finding-Your-Place-2021_SEL-Takes-Center-Stage-in-K12.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> Mahoney, J. L., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2018, November 26). *An update on social and emotional learning outcome research*. Kappan. <https://kappanonline.org/social-emotional-learning-outcome-research-mahoney-durlak-weissberg/>
- <sup>4</sup> Mahoney et al. (2018, November 26).
- <sup>5</sup> Bryant et al. (2021, October).