Social and Emotional Learning for All
Access, Cultural Proficiency, and Cultural Responsiveness

Throughout Massachusetts, teachers and administrators strive to systematically develop the social and emotional learning (SEL)[1] of their students, for many reasons including promoting academic achievement and prosocial behavior, as well as lowering emotional distress and conduct problems.[2] At the same time, the cultural backgrounds of our students continue to become ever more diverse and many of our educators are building a practice of culturally responsive teaching (CRT).[3] The guidance in this document from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) addresses the critical intersection of SEL and CRT. It draws on input from the voices of a diverse group of Massachusetts educators and administrators, along with those of parents and nationally recognized scholars in SEL, and was crafted with the following goals in mind:

- **For districts and administrators**:
  - Provide tools for examining the extent to which SEL is culturally responsive.
  - Share resources and strategies for increasing the linkage between SEL and CRT.
- **For teachers**:
  - Make explicit connections between SEL and CRT.
  - Foster reflection about current practice, and provide tools for enacting culturally responsive SEL in schools and classrooms.

DESE encourages educators to consider SEL instruction on a continuum from access and exposure to culturally responsive SEL. By introducing this continuum, we seek to ensure that all students have meaningful exposure to high-quality SEL, and all educators are working to respect, value, and leverage students' identities, backgrounds, and cultures. As districts and schools continue to develop students' social and emotional competencies, we collectively seek to ensure equity for all students.

SEL Equity Continuum: Access to SEL → Culturally Proficient SEL → Culturally Responsive SEL

- *Access* to SEL refers to the imperative that **all students** have opportunities for SEL learning experiences and skill development as a part of a tiered system of supports;
- *Culturally proficient* in SEL refers to the creation of learning experiences that are **bias-free** and **respectful** of students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges; and
- *Culturally responsive* SEL refers to practices that **actively draw upon** students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges as a strategy to **deepen learning**.

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[1] DESE commonly uses the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL's), definition of SEL: *SEL is the process of developing students' and adults' social and emotional competencies—the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that individuals need to make successful choices.* CASEL has defined five core competencies for SEL represented on this page.
[2] (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011)
[3] Cultural Proficiency: A Strategy to Address Equity Gaps in Students' Achievement and Learning Experiences.

Each of these terms will be discussed in greater depth throughout the document. Each builds upon the other, with the ultimate goal being that all students have the chance to develop their social and emotional competencies in culturally responsive learning environments.

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ACCESS TO SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

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Regardless of zip code, Massachusetts students deserve school experiences that "*inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings; sincerity, good humor, and all social affections, and generous sentiments.*"[4] While the needs and approaches of supporting social and emotional outcomes vary, DESE seeks to ensure that all students have access to SEL. We have published Guidelines on Implementing SEL Curricula, K-12 and a website dedicated to providing information and resources about SEL.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified four general approaches to SEL instruction:

- **Free-standing SEL lessons** that provide explicit, step-by step instructions to teach students social and emotional competencies across the five core competencies;
- **General teaching practices** that create classroom and school-wide conditions that facilitate and support social and emotional development in students;
- **Integration** of skill instruction and practices that support SEL within the context of an **academic curriculum**; and
- Guidance to administrators and school leaders on how to facilitate SEL as a **school-wide initiative**.
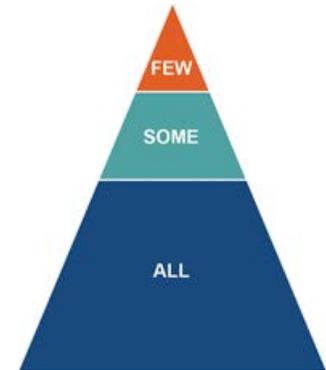
Massachusetts schools commonly implement multi-tiered systems of support,[5] particularly around students' academic and behavioral needs. DESE also recommends a tiered approach to SEL, where educators provide high quality instruction and general practices that help all students develop the core competencies of SEL (*tier one*); where educators and support staff provide supplemental supports based on individual students' social and emotional needs (*tier two*); and where more intensive supports are available when individual student needs are more urgent and/or intensive (*tier three*).

Tier one SEL strategies will generally occur in whole-school, whole-class settings. Tier two and three supports may be provided through targeted group instruction, embedded within a classroom setting, in individualized work with students, in counseling sessions, and/or in other settings as appropriate. This type of system is central to the goal of the Department's strategic priority to support social-emotional learning, health, and safety: *to promote systems and strategies that foster safe, positive, healthy, culturally-competent, and inclusive learning environments that address students' varied needs and improve educational outcomes for all.*

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[4] Massachusetts State Constitution, Section V, Chapter II

[5] A mulit-tiered system of support can be defined as a comprehensive system of differentiated supports that includes: evidence based instruction, universal screening, progress monitoring, formative assessments, research-based interventions matched to student's needs.

Rethinking discipline strategies and outcomes is one of many educational areas of focus that may benefit from a tiered approach to SEL. Schools and districts are expected to periodically examine their own discipline-related data[6] and are encouraged to review their data submitted to DESE through the School Safety and Discipline Report, as well as local data including but not limited to office discipline referrals; to conduct a root cause analysis;[7] and to consider ways that strengthening tiered SEL supports may assist with locally identified challenges and goals.

DESE encourages more focused attention on equity across all three tiers of SEL practice. All students deserve the chance to develop positive social and emotional competencies, and all students deserve supplemental and intensive supports if they demonstrate the need. Inequities in statewide disciplinary data are disturbing and DESE has engaged with the field to support local efforts through a professional learning network.

As an example of inequities in statewide disciplinary trends, African American students, Latino students, and students with disabilities with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) continue to be suspended at rates significantly greater than their peers. For instance, the rate for African American/Black students (9.3 percent) was nearly 3.5 times, and for Hispanic/Latino (7.7 percent) nearly 2.9 times, of that of white students (2.7 percent).[8] This suggests that the nature of tiered SEL supports may not be consistent for all students at all times, and that for staff and administrators further self-reflection and additional or alternative approaches to setting and supporting behavioral expectations for students (including self-management, relationship skills, and more) may be necessary and helpful. Furthermore, there is evidence that when implemented well, multi-tiered systems of support have been shown to reduce office discipline referral (ODR) rates. School personnel frequently use ODR rates to evaluate student behavior and the behavioral climate of schools. ODRs are associated with problematic behaviors and can be predictive of student aggression, drug use, defiance, behavior disorders, and juvenile delinquency.[9,10]

> **Additional Resource:**
> - Safe and Supportive Learning Environment Resources *prepared for Massachusetts by the National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments*

A multi-tiered approach to social and emotional learning, in addition to appropriate systems of positive behavior supports and other strategies to support a safe and supportive school culture, may improve academic and behavioral outcomes for students. Ensuring equitable access to tiered social and emotional learning and supports is vital to ensure positive school experiences for all students in the Commonwealth.

Curriculum Frameworks Guiding Principles
Massachusetts curriculum frameworks provide teachers, students, and families with clear and shared expectations for what all students should know and be able to do at the end of each year; they formalize

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[6] Student Discipline Regulations, 603 CMR 53.14 (2)
[7] Supporting School-Level Root Cause Analyses of Disproportionate Discipline Outcomes
[8] Student Discipline Data Reports and the Rethinking Discipline Initiative
[9] Bui, X., Quirk, C., Almazan, S., & Valenti, M. (2010). Positive behavioral interventions and supports research and practice. Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education, 1-13.
[10] Simonsen, B., Eber, L., Black, A. C., Sugai, G., Lewandowski, H., Sims, B., & Myers, D. (2012). Illinois statewide positive behavioral interventions and supports: Evolution and impact on student outcomes across years. Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 14(1), 5-16.

the expectation that all students in the Commonwealth have access to the same academic content, regardless of their zip code, background, or abilities. DESE integrated SEL core competencies as guiding principles in revisions to the Massachusetts ELA/Literacy and Mathematics Curriculum Frameworks, and intends to continue this practice in additional revisions to other subject area standards, to clarify the expectation that all students deserve access to SEL.

> **Additional SEL Resources :**
> - DESE resources to support SEL Guiding Principle for Mathematics
> - DESE resources to support SEL Guiding Principle for ELA/Literacy
> - CASEL's SEL Resource Library

CULTURALLY PROFICIENT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

In 2016–2017, about 9 percent of educators in Massachusetts were people of color, while students of color made up nearly 40 percent of the student body.[11] Given that our teaching force does not always reflect the same demographics as our students, it is critical that all educators demonstrate skill in teaching students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, and in building a learning environment that supports all students to be successful. As such, cultural proficiency is paramount, and is therefore an area of focus for DESE, educator preparation programs, and districts alike. DESE has established the following indicators regarding cultural proficiency in the Massachusetts Standards for Effective Practice:

- Indicator II-C. **Cultural Proficiency**: Actively creates and maintains an environment in which students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges are respected.
- Indicator II-B. **Learning Environment**: Creates and maintains a safe and collaborative learning environment that motivates students to take academic risks, challenge themselves, and claim ownership of their learning.

> *"Many SEL programs bill themselves as being racially and culturally neutral. The reality is they aren't. Teachers need to understand how SEL is situated in racial politics. We still have racial stratification. Society still marginalizes students of color, English learners, and low-income students."*
> -- Zaretta Hammond, Author of ***Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain***

Culturally proficient learning experiences provide students with both a *mirror* to reflect on their own culture and identity and a *window* to look onto the culture and identities of others.[12] For example, when building students' self-awareness skills, culturally proficient SEL instruction respects and honors students' individual and family/community identities and backgrounds and also supports students to consider how their identities and backgrounds are perceived by others and how they perceive others' identities and backgrounds. In a culturally proficient SEL lesson, self-awareness and social awareness are often tightly linked.

In 2017, DESE piloted a "Views of Climate and Learning" (VOCAL) survey with students in grades 5, 8, and 10, and plans to pilot a second iteration in 2018. The data below comes from the responses of 10th

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[11] 2018 Massachusetts State Equity Plan

[12] Style, Emily (1988). Curriculum As Window and Mirror. Oak Knoll School's "Listening for All Voices." and National Seed Project.

graders to one of the questions in that survey and is an example of how VOCAL information can help support schools and districts in reflecting on school climate and culture.

Cultural Proficiency in the Massachusetts School Climate Survey, 2017				
Think of the last 30 days in school	Always True	Mostly True	Mostly Untrue	Never True
Adults working at this school treat all students respectfully, regardless of a student's race, culture, family background, sex, or sexual orientation.[13]	46%	41%	10%	3%

Representing and respecting students' cultures and identities in SEL practices can affect school climate and safety in tangible ways. As noted in the Principles for Ensuring Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for LGBTQ Students,[14] research shows that inclusion of LGBTQ topics in curricula corresponds to all students reporting that they feel safer in school, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Whether through an analysis of VOCAL data or through locally developed instruments, attention to students' perceptions of school climate can lead to improved outcomes for all students.

Professional Learning
The Department has provided the following statement regarding professional learning, cultural proficiency, and SEL on the Social and Emotional Learning in Massachusetts website:

> The Department strongly recommends sustained professional development and collaborative learning around issues of cultural competency and Social and Emotional Learning. Developing students' social-emotional competencies can provide an opportunity to develop a sense of positive self-worth in connection to a student's race, color, sex, gender identity, religion, national origin, and sexual orientation. Educators are encouraged to develop examples and illustrations of these competencies that are congruent with the social and cultural experiences of their students. In addition to contributing to academic success, SEL programs can also support the development of students' sense of autonomy, agency, and social justice.

Massachusetts has established standards for High Quality Professional Development (HQPD). In addition, adult professional learning experiences must themselves be culturally proficient and grounded in strong SEL practice in order to be effective. For an example of how to design job-embedded professional development, see the Guidebook for Inclusive Practice Job-Embedded PD Planning Guide.

Additional Cultural Proficiency Resources:
- Is Social-Emotional Learning Really Going to Work for Students of Color? (Education Week, Teacher, 6/7/17)
- Cultural Proficiency: A Strategy to Address Equity Gaps in Students' Achievement and Learning Experiences. (MA DESE, 2017)

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[13] n=45,009 10th graders. Massachusetts School Climate Survey, 2017 STATE REPORT.
[14] Principles – Safe Environment approved by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, March 24, 2015.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is built on a foundation of culturally proficient practice. It depends on approaching culture and identity as assets. Lessons are culturally respectful and bias-free, and they also leverage culture to improve and deepen learning. *"Educators can… use culture to build trust and relationships with students as well as develop the cognitive scaffolding that builds on the broader knowledge students already have so that they can become competent, independent learners."*[15]

What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?
"Culturally responsive teaching is using the cultural knowledge, prior experience, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. The use of cultural referents in teaching bridges and explains the mainstream culture, while validating and affirming students' own cultures. **Culturally responsive teaching uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments.**"[16]

In culturally responsive SEL instruction, educators build upon culturally proficient practice by intentionally integrating knowledge of students' culture and identity into SEL instructional practice to build students' SEL skills. For example, when supporting students' self-management skills, culturally responsive SEL instruction might integrate music, dance, or culturally appropriate stories, identified by the students or their families, to teach strategies for overcoming challenges and meeting goals.

"**[Three Signature Practices](#)**" **Oakland Unified School District**
• Engaging Practice One: *Welcoming Ritual: Activities for Inclusion* • Engaging Practice Two: *Sense-Making and "Brain Breaks"* • Engaging Practice Three: *Optimistic Closure: Reflections & Looking Forward*

The Department strongly encourages all educators to intentionally strive for culturally responsive SEL to be foundational in their instructional practice. One additional resource that may be helpful in guiding this work is the [Social-Emotional Learning Skills & Culturally Responsive Teaching Heuristic](#) developed by the Massachusetts Consortium for Social-Emotional Learning in Teacher Education (SEL-TED).

Conclusion:
As Massachusetts classrooms become ever more diverse, DESE seeks to develop a common language for social and emotional learning that is accessible, culturally proficient, and culturally responsive. In support of this, the reflection guide on the following pages is offered as a way for educator teams to reflect on and self-assess their SEL practice through the lens of cultural proficiency and culturally responsive teaching. It is intended to start or deepen the conversation around high-quality SEL instruction and to prompt best thinking and collaboration.

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[15] [Zaretta Hammond.](#)
[16] [Gay & Ladson-Billings](#) (2013). The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. [Curriculum Inquiry](#). 43:1.

Social and Emotional Learning & Culturally Responsive Teaching Reflection Guide

Educator teams can use this tool to discuss and self-assess their practices in developing students' Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skills through the lens of cultural proficiency and culturally responsive teaching. This tool aligns well to the [Massachusetts Standards for Effective Practice](#) and may be used in setting professional practice goals or identifying strategies for growth. Most specifically, the following indicators may be most relevant:

For teachers:
- Indicator II-B. **Learning Environment**: Creates and maintains a safe and collaborative learning environment that motivates students to take academic risks, challenge themselves, and claim ownership of their learning.
- Indicator II-C. **Cultural Proficiency**: Actively creates and maintains an environment in which students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges are respected.

For administrators:
- Indicator II-A. **Environment**: Develops and executes effective plans, procedures, routines, and operational systems to address a full range of safety, health, and emotional and social needs of students.
- Indicator IV-B. **Cultural Proficiency**: Ensures that policies and practices enable staff members and students to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment in which students' backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges are respected.

Additionally, Indicators II-B and III-C of the [Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP) rubric](#) provide helpful alignment to cultural proficiency and SEL.

The tool below is designed to crosswalk the five competencies of SEL instruction (*self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making*) alongside the continuum of culturally responsive SEL (*access, proficiency, responsiveness*). After assessing basic access to SEL, the guide asks educators to reflect on specific examples or evidence of culturally proficient or responsive SEL practice relative to their: 1) learning environment, 2) instructional materials, and 3) instructional practice. Completing the tool will drive conversation about the extent to which efforts in each of these areas can be deepened for the benefit of our students.

As a reminder:
- *Access* to SEL refers to the imperative that **all students** have opportunities for SEL learning experiences and skill development as a part of a tiered system of supports;
- *Cultural proficiency* in SEL refers to the creation of learning experiences that are **bias-free** and **respectful** of students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges; and
- *Culturally responsive* SEL instruction refers to practices that actively draw upon students' diverse backgrounds, identities, strengths, and challenges as a strategy to **deepen learning**.

Instructions: In the table below, reflect on how you support students' **self-awareness** through your *learning environment*, *instructional materials*, and *instructional practice*. How do you, or could you, provide culturally proficient and/or culturally responsive SEL experiences for your students?

Students have **access to SEL** instruction that supports:	**Culturally Proficient** SEL instruction is bias-free and respectful:	**Culturally responsive** SEL instruction actively draws upon students identities and backgrounds:
Self-awareness: The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.	**Learning Environment:**	**Learning Environment:**
	Instructional Materials:	**Instructional Materials:**
Students have experiences with self-awareness through: ☐ Free-standing lessons ☐ General teaching practices ☐ Curriculum integration ☐ School-wide initiatives ☐ None of the above	**Instructional Practice:**	**Instructional Practice:**

Instructions: In the table below, reflect on how you support students' **self-management** through your *learning environment*, *instructional materials*, and *instructional practice*. How do you, or could you, provide culturally proficient and/or culturally responsive SEL experiences for your students?

Students have **access to SEL** instruction that supports:	**Culturally Proficient** SEL instruction is bias-free and respectful:	**Culturally responsive** SEL instruction actively draws upon students identities and backgrounds:
Self-management: The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.	**Learning Environment:**	**Learning Environment:**
	Instructional Materials:	**Instructional Materials:**
Students have experiences with self-management through: ☐ Free-standing lessons ☐ General teaching practices ☐ Curriculum integration ☐ School-wide initiatives ☐ None of the above	**Instructional Practice:**	**Instructional Practice:**

Instructions: In the table below, reflect on how you support students' **social-awareness** through your *learning environment*, *instructional materials*, and *instructional practice*. How do you, or could you, provide culturally proficient and/or culturally responsive SEL experiences for your students?

Students have **access to SEL** instruction that supports: ➔	**Culturally Proficient** SEL instruction is bias-free and respectful: ➔	**Culturally responsive** SEL instruction actively draws upon students identities and backgrounds:
Social awareness: The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures; to understand social and ethical norms for behavior; and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.	**Learning Environment:** **Instructional Materials:**	**Learning Environment:** **Instructional Materials:**
Students have experiences with social-awareness through: ☐ Free-standing lessons ☐ General teaching practices ☐ Curriculum integration ☐ School-wide initiatives ☐ None of the above	**Instructional Practice:**	**Instructional Practice:**

Instructions: In the table below, reflect on how you support students' **relationship skills** through your *learning environment*, *instructional materials*, and *instructional practice*. How do you, or could you, provide culturally proficient and/or culturally responsive SEL experiences for your students?

Students have **access to SEL** instruction that supports: ➜	**Culturally Proficient** SEL instruction is bias-free and respectful: ➜	**Culturally responsive** SEL instruction actively draws upon students identities and backgrounds:
Relationship skills: The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.	**Learning Environment:**	**Learning Environment:**
	Instructional Materials:	**Instructional Materials:**
Students have experiences with relationship skills through: ☐ Free-standing lessons ☐ General teaching practices ☐ Curriculum integration ☐ School-wide initiatives ☐ None of the above	**Instructional Practice:**	**Instructional Practice:**

Instructions: In the table below, reflect on how you support students' **responsible decision-making** through your *learning environment*, *instructional materials*, and *instructional practice*. How do you, or could you, provide culturally proficient and/or culturally responsive SEL experiences for your students?

Students have **access to SEL** instruction that supports:	**Culturally Proficient** SEL instruction is bias-free and respectful:	**Culturally responsive** SEL instruction actively draws upon students identities and backgrounds:
Responsible decision-making: The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the wellbeing of self and others.	**Learning Environment:**	**Learning Environment:**
	Instructional Materials:	**Instructional Materials:**
Students have experiences with responsible decision-making through: ☐ Free-standing lessons ☐ General teaching practices ☐ Curriculum integration ☐ School-wide initiatives ☐ None of the above	**Instructional Practice:**	**Instructional Practice:**