



RECLAIM SOCIAL- EMOTIONAL LEARNING:

**CENTERING ORGANIZING
PRAXIS FOR HOLISTICALLY
SAFE SCHOOLS**

2020

The Communities
for Just Schools
Fund is a national
donor collaborative
that provides
resources in support
of community-led
organizations.





The School of the Future

by Naima Whitted, 9th Grade



Naima Whitted is a 9th grader in the School for the Arts at Ridge View High School in Columbia, South Carolina. She hopes to pursue a career in animation and in her free time, she loves working on her Webtoon comic.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part 1 – Introduction	8
Part 2 – Community of Practice	16
Part 3 – Culturally-Affirming SEL: A Path Forward	24
Part 4 – What We’ve Learned	28
Part 5 – Conclusion	50
Part 6 – Appendix	52

About Us

The Communities for Just Schools Fund is a national donor collaborative that provides resources in support of community-led organizations that are working to ensure positive, safe, and supportive school climates that protect and affirm the inherent cultural dignity of all students and foster the success of all students.

Dedication

Allison R. Brown, you are the heartbeat of this work. You never wavered in your commitment to fighting for welcoming, nurturing, and affirming school spaces for Black and Brown young people and paved a path that showed us what the future could look like.

Your light, your wisdom, and your dedication guide the path forward. Thank you for illuminating the world with your brilliance. We will forever work towards achieving the world we all deserve -- a world rooted in equity, justice, joy, and love. We love you. This report is dedicated to you.

Acknowledgments

The report’s main author was CJSF’s Education Anew Fellow, Cierra Kaler-Jones, with support from CJSF’s community partners and staff, including Jaime T. Koppel, Thena Robinson Mock, Allie McCullen, Alexis J. Smith, and our beloved ancestor, Allison R. Brown.

We are grateful to [Story2 Designs](#) for their storytelling guidance, thought partnership, and for the design and layout of this Radport.

The Communities for Just Schools Fund (CJSF) would like to thank our community partners -- youth, educator, and parent organizers who advocate on behalf of young people who are disproportionately impacted by punitive school discipline policies and practices, specifically policies that are racist, homophobic, and anti-Black. We are grateful for the powerful and beautiful work they move in the

world and this radport only provides a glimpse into the highlights of how they organize to ensure schools are holistically -- emotionally, physically, psychologically, intellectually -- safe.

Thank you to our partners and network partners who hosted learning exchanges, served as panelists on the [#SELWebinarSeries](#), and led presentations and discussions including: Youth on Board, Twin Cities Innovation Alliance, Californians For Justice, Girls for Gender Equity, SouthWest Organizing Project, Rockaway Youth Task Force, Teaching for Change & D.C. Area Educators for Social Justice, Critical Exposure, RYSE Center, Communities United/VOYCE, Village of Wisdom, Boston Area Youth Organizing Project, and Teachers Unite. Thank you to the Association of Alaska School Boards (especially Konrad Frank and Lori Grassgreen) for your partnership and for hosting our site visit to Alaska.

A special thank you to the Alliance for Quality Education for their integral role in planning and facilitating the work of the Community of Practice.

This report was made possible by Grantmakers for Thriving Youth Policy Working Group (GTYPWG) and our donor members. Thanks also to Ed Counsel for their thoughtful facilitation of learning and exchange among GTYPWG grantees.

Purpose

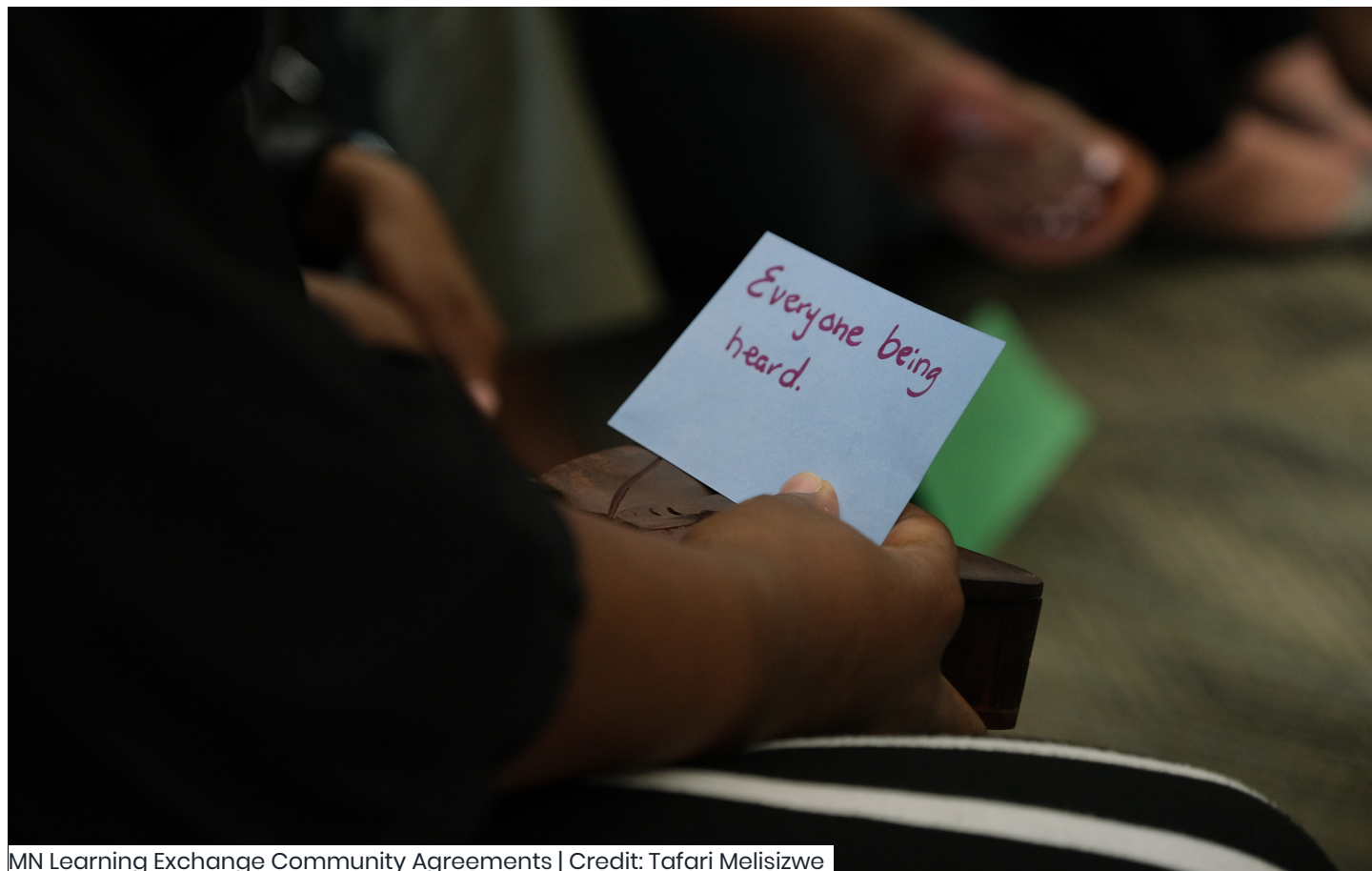
In a moment when there is a national spotlight on what safe and supportive schools look and feel like, Communities for Just Schools Fund (CJSF) convened our national network of partners (youth, parent, and teacher-led organizing groups) to press back on harmful narratives about safety -- and to instead place conversations about safety into the more holistic, appropriate container of **culturally-affirming social-emotional learning**. Through the year-long Community of Practice, we collected survey data from our partners about their work related to safety and SEL; conducted site visits to places like Long Beach, California, and Juneau, Alaska; hosted in-person and virtual learning exchanges, facilitated a Twitter chat, and held an [#SELWebinarSeries](#). These gatherings centered the

critical perspectives of organizers and gleaned important insights about what truly makes schools safe and ensures students feel a sense of belonging. The findings from this year-long exploration of culturally-affirming SEL are detailed in this radical report (“radport”).

Across the country, school districts, researchers, and policymakers are adopting social-emotional learning (SEL) as a framework to define and measure the set of skills students need to be successful in school and life. However, these SEL conversations, practices, and curricula are too often based on white, heteropatriarchal, and ableist norms and values, which further enact emotional and psychological violence onto Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ youth of color, in particular. The current narrative around SEL is that young people must manage themselves and their emotions, conform and constrict their identities, and not express their fullest, most authentic selves.

Culturally-affirming SEL asks critical questions of all of us: ***How do people relate to themselves? How do people relate to land? How do people relate to their community?*** Culturally-affirming SEL is about reclaiming -- reclaiming our relationships with ourselves and our emotions, our ancestors, our spirituality, our creativity, our land, and our relationships with others. It’s about resisting colonialism and capitalism, by knowing ourselves, and honoring the unique cultures, languages, and legacies that we come from, so that we can celebrate the humanity in others to fight for a world rooted in equity and justice, together. What does it mean to radically reimagine what schooling can be? It means following the organizers who have been fighting for policies and practices to make this a reality for decades.

This radport highlights examples of SEL from organizing praxis, problematizes current SEL frameworks ([especially when SEL is used as another form of policing](#)), and illuminates the connections between holistic safety and SEL.

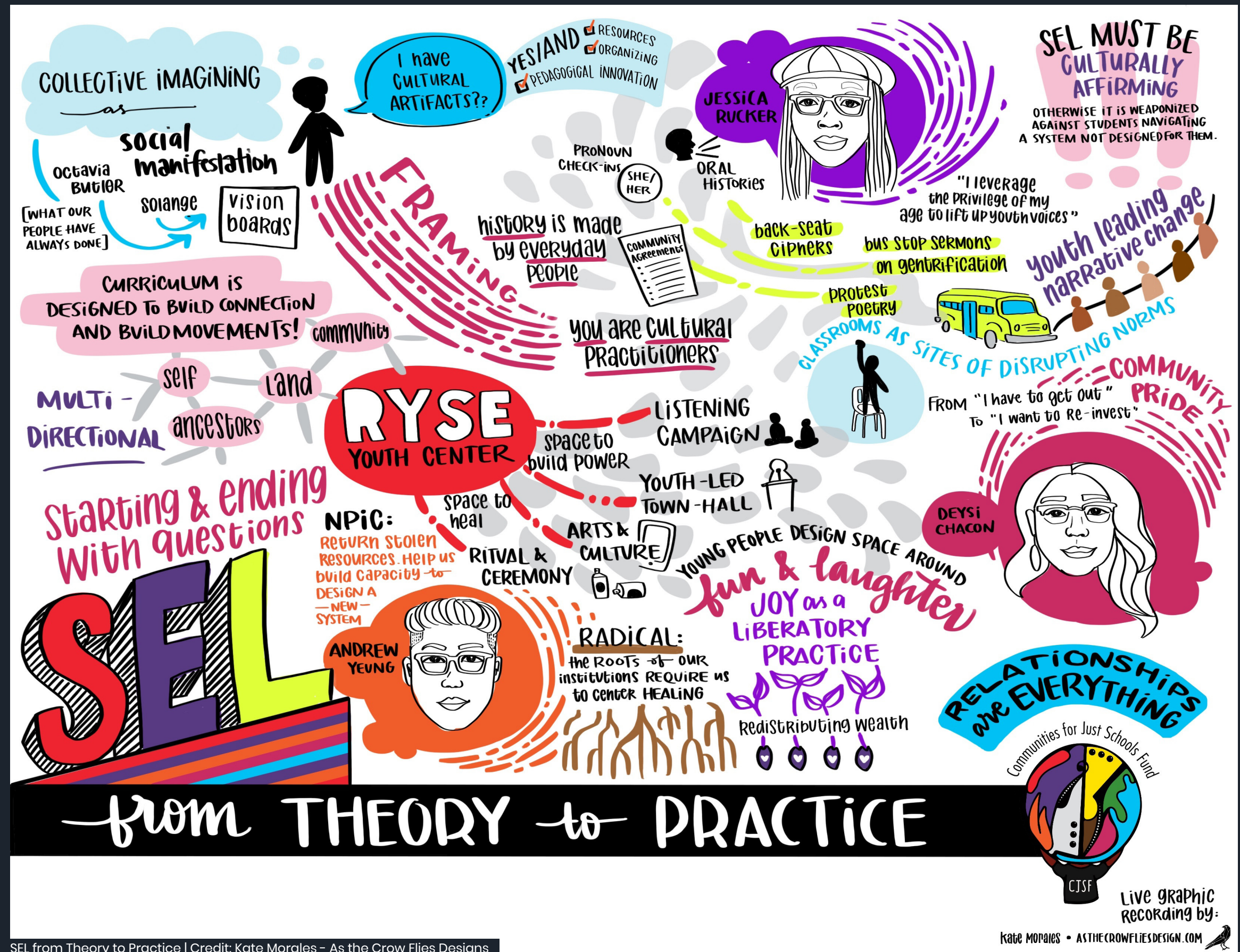


How do people
relate to
themselves?

How do people
relate to land?

How do people
relate to their
community?

Imagine stepping into a school building and immediately feeling the warmth of meaningful relationships, colorful hallways, and critical inquiry. Young people co-lead lessons alongside educators as they analyze science fiction texts and music videos about Afrofuturistic worlds. Together, young people and educators examine structural and systemic oppression and the historical narratives that give way to the status quo. They identify ways to act in service of social justice based on their understanding of their strengths and expressions of knowledge. Young people develop campaigns and organize their communities as their teachers invite local organizations into the classroom based on students' interests.



Imagine stepping into a school building and immediately feeling the warmth of meaningful relationships, colorful hallways, and critical inquiry.

Parents direct scientific lessons about food and water justice and land sovereignty, as they share their indigenous knowledge and language with a class. There are lessons about radical self and communal care in a unit about the Black Panther Party's full history. Young people are encouraged to notice and observe their emotions and there are spaces for them to meditate, reflect, move their bodies, or create art to express how they are feeling. They are supported by counselors, nurses, social workers, and psychologists while processing their emotions and sustaining their overall well-being.

Each day begins with a talking circle for young people to share their thoughts, opinions, and reflections, as young people and educators practice wholehearted listening and find connections in their sharing. Educators are supported in understanding their own emotions and provided with on-going training and mentorship. Young people, educators, school staff, parents, and all those who come into contact with the school building feel holistically -- mentally, physically, emotionally, psychologically, intellectually -- safe.

This is the true promise of SEL, that it can be a tool for creating school spaces that are nurturing, safe, and affirming, particularly for Black and Brown students and LGBTQ+ students of color. SEL can be used as a tool to create learning environments that are rooted in equity and deep relationships. **SEL is a more appropriate container for safety than the harmful narratives that, for too long, have privileged school hardening.**

The Troubled Narrative about Safety

The United States has a long and violent history of using schooling as a mechanism for demanding conformity and perpetuating racism, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and other forms of oppression. Schools have long been sites of colonization, where they try to strip young people of their culture and language. During the late 19th and mid-20th centuries, Indigenous young people were ripped from their communities and brought to boarding schools to assimilate them to Eurocentric culture. Often, Christian missionaries, who acted as teachers and administrators, forced Indigenous young people to cut their hair, a source of identity and pride, and exchange their traditional clothing for uniforms. Colonizers punished them for speaking in their indigenous languages. This psychological and emotional policing attempted to erase their culture.

Now, the punitive nature of schooling persists, particularly to surveil and police Black and Brown young people and their communities. As early as 2007, school districts began arming teachers. The 2018 Parkland, Florida and Santa Fe, Texas school shootings led the Trump administration to appoint a new Federal Commission on School Safety. The Commission's report called for more school hardening, including arming trained teachers and staff. With school hardening, students, especially Black and Brown students, are traumatized and re-traumatized. School hardening shifts the narrative from young people being learners to them being regarded as threats.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed FL SB 7030 into law on May 5th, 2019, which included a provision for teachers to carry guns in classrooms. This bill also gave school boards the power to establish guardian programs without local sheriffs' approval and allowed schools to contract with security companies. Lastly, this bill gave the state commissioner of education more power to punish school districts that don't comply with the new safety laws. After the Parkland shootings, the Laurens County Georgia school board was the first in Georgia to take advantage of the 2014 Georgia

"Guns Everywhere Law" bill, which provided Georgia districts the authority to arm teachers. These jarring efforts are not anomalies, but rather examples of the frightening reality of school hardening.

Black young people are more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to attend schools with police presence.

School hardening uses different tactics such as state-of-the-art surveillance technology, metal detectors, and physical environments that mirror prisons (such as being surrounded by metal fences). School districts are [investing millions of dollars](#) to "target harden" schools. Some of these practices include expensive surveillance systems, facial recognition software, bullet-proof whiteboards, and other fortified entries. What is also troublesome is the number of schools that invest in School Resource Officers (SROs). Our partners describe how many [SROs use intimidation tactics](#).

both verbal and physical, to threaten young peoples' safety. In addition, there is no empirical research that confirms that school hardening techniques make schools safer.

Research shows that referrals to school police and other disciplinary measures are at the classroom teacher's discretion. Both implicit and explicit bias, as well as overt racism, govern classroom proceedings. Nationally, Black students make up about 17 percent of enrollment in schools that referred students to law enforcement, but were 26 percent of students who were referred.¹ Additionally, Black young people are more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to attend schools with police presence.²

Policing in the South began as patrols to interrogate, intimidate, and return enslaved Africans to plantations who escaped. In essence, the police force used violence to uphold the system of enslavement.³ In the 1960s, police presence and punitive disciplinary measures were used to stifle the Black Power movement and Black Panther Party. In the 1980s, policing became a cruel tactic to imprison Black and Brown people through "tough on crime" initiatives.⁴ It is by no coincidence that history repeats itself.



Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) at a Rethinking Safety press conference on shifting the \$33 million from School Resource Officers to mental health resources in schools.

Organizers like [Black Organizing Project \(BOP\)](#) in Oakland, California, have been organizing to eliminate school police officers for over a decade. They developed a [People's Plan](#) that demanded that the Oakland Unified School District divest from police in schools and reinvest in support for whole child initiatives and young people with disabilities. The People's Plan is SEL in motion -- leaning into social awareness to research, discuss, and acknowledge the historical context and develop action-oriented solutions to address a persistent problem (i.e. policing).

In the [Denver Public Schools resolution to eliminate school-based police officers](#), they noted, "DPS has an obligation to promote the healthy development of each one of its students, which includes **protecting them from the impact of systemic racism** to the greatest extent possible while they are at school." This resolution was a result of the powerful organizing of partners, like [Padres y Jóvenes Unidos](#).

The [Milwaukee Public School Board unanimously passed Resolution 2021R-003](#) to end all contracts between the Milwaukee Police Department and Milwaukee Public Schools. Additionally, this resolution ceased any contracts to buy or maintain criminalizing equipment, including metal detectors, facial recognition software, and social media monitoring software. This victory resulted from two and half years of organizing on the part of one of our partners, [Leaders Igniting Transformation \(LIT\)](#). In a statement on the win, executive director Dakota Hall proclaimed, **"This is not the end of our fight. We will continue to work to hold public institutions and systems accountable for their over-policing and racist practices and procedures that have harmed BIPOC communities for centuries. The work does not stop tonight. It's time we all take our activism for Black and Brown lives to the next level."** The decision is another drumbeat in the march toward true safety for Black and Brown students.



Black Organizing Project at Oakland Unified School District

In the South, [Nollie Jenkins Family Center](#) has been transforming lives through their work to nurture the next generation of leaders, end corporal punishment, and stop Mississippi's school-to-prison pipeline. Nollie Jenkins Family Center successfully organized for an end of corporal punishment in Durant, MS public schools -- the first jurisdiction in Mississippi to do so.

CJSF partners, many of whose freedom dreams--like Harriet's, like Ida's, like Septima's--have marked the path toward the possibility of police-free schools for years. As school districts across the country end their contracts with police, our partners continue to organize around what safety should look like -- social-emotional support, nurses, school psychologists, social workers, culturally-affirming pedagogy, and family-community-school collaborative partnerships. What we've seen, however, is how SEL practices (including restorative justice and mindfulness) have been co-opted and weaponized against Black and Brown young people.

Now, in the midst of a global pandemic and continued racial injustice in the United States, policing persists. Even during emergency remote learning, Black and Brown young people are not safe from policing in their own homes. Grace, a 15-year old Black girl in Michigan [was sent to juvenile detention for not doing her homework](#). A Black seventh grader, Isaiah, in Colorado [played with a Nerf gun during class and his school called the police](#). He was suspended for five days and received a documented record with the Paso County Sheriff's Office saying that he brought a firearm to school, even though it was a toy in his home. Both young people have (dis)abilities -- an intersection of their identities that must be named.

Classroom "Zoom rules" have been circulating the internet that proclaim rules such as: "Find a quiet place, free from distraction; video needs to remain ON to promote focus. Eye contact should be maintained; and refrain from chewing gum, eating, and drinking in front of the camera." Young people, in some cases, are asked to wear their school uniform on camera. This control tactic mirrors punitive school dress code policies in school buildings that disproportionately affect Black and

Brown young people, namely Black and Brown girls and transgender, non-conforming youth of color. In Gwinnett County, Georgia, a teacher was chastised by the district for displaying a Black Lives Matter poster during her online class. Eleven students addressed the school board, chiding their hypocrisy of issuing a statement professing the need to address racial equity but citing the poster as a distraction.⁵ This policing is not new, but rather in virtual learning spaces, it is so insidious that this is just a new iteration.

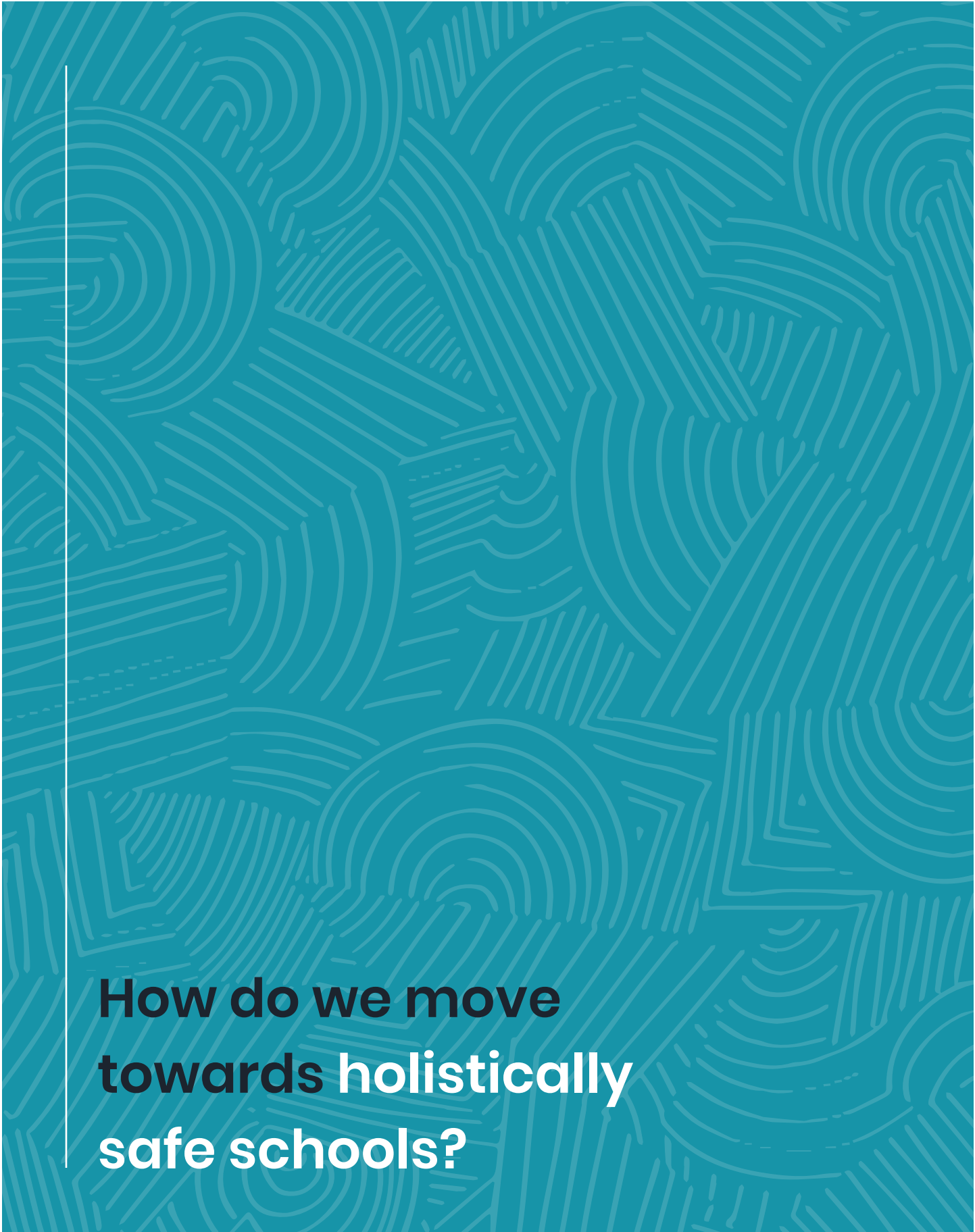
School policing is not only physical, but emotional, psychological, and intellectual. When young people don't see themselves reflected in the curriculum or only learn deficit narratives about their communities' contributions, it is a form of "spirit murdering." In 1987, legal scholar Patricia Williams conceptualized the term "spirit murdering" to describe the product of racism that not only inflicts harm and pain onto Black and Brown people, but kills their spirits. As Dr. Bettina Love applies it to education, this is the ["spirit murdering" of Black and Brown children](#) because there is a denial of their humanity through punitive discipline that disproportionately affects them and school curriculum and a teaching force that doesn't reflect them.

Partners like [Providence Student Union](#) in Providence, Rhode Island have developed campaigns to include Ethnic Studies as a core component of their curriculum. They worked with their school department to create a curriculum that was more reflective of their community through student-facilitated meetings and direct actions like rallies outside of the Providence School Department. They used the powerful statement [#OurHistoryMatters](#). As our partner Girls for Gender Equity noted in their report [The School Girls Deserve](#), "Youth stated that the limited representation in the curriculum was a form of violence because it made them feel disconnected and less valued by the school." Teacher organizers through [Teaching for Change](#), [Zinn Education Project](#), and [D.C. Area Educators for Social Justice](#) created campaigns to [Teach Reconstruction](#), [Teach the Black Freedom Struggle](#), [Teach Central America](#), and [Teach Climate Justice](#). These campaigns encourage

educators to teach outside the textbook and introduce young people to people's history and the history of resistance to further spark social justice movements.

If the curriculum is emotionally and psychologically violent to Black and Brown students and completely erases the resistance of their ancestors, how are schools leaning into fulfilling the core competencies of social and cultural awareness? How can schools be places where young people can recognize their strengths if the curriculum is oppressive? How can you take perspectives, respect others, and appreciate diversity, if the curriculum and the actual school infrastructure only highlight a history that presents the United States as the victor, rather than for the violence, colonization, and looting that this country was founded on? These are critical questions that must be asked when examining school curriculum as a tool for incorporating SEL into classrooms.

We see examples of hardening schools and violent school curriculum that end up creating unsafe environments for students. Students of color, especially Black and Brown children, face the brunt of these initiatives.



**How do we move
towards holistically
safe schools?**

In 2019-20, CJSF brought together our national network of community organizing partners to foster conversations about and make connections between *holistic safety* and *SEL* in schools - using a constructivist approach to knowledge sharing and development. In this instance, the practitioners are education justice organizers from CJSF's partner network - practitioners whose lived experiences as students, family members, and educators in public schools form one part of the rich, deep expertise they individually and collectively offer. The Community of Practice was designed to highlight partners' work, create space for connection and synergy across groups, and equip ourselves with the knowledge and tools to connect existing organizing efforts to SEL and safety conversations.



MN Learning Exchange Centerpiece | Credit: Tafari Melisizwe

What is Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)?

This work took us to places like [Long Beach, California](#) to learn from [Californians for Justice](#) about their [relationship-centered schools model](#); Alaska to learn about how the [Association of Alaska School Boards](#) is embedding cultural safety into their policies and practices; [Minnesota](#) to learn from the [Twin Cities Innovation Alliance](#) about liberatory and human-centered community data use in schools; and Albuquerque, New Mexico to learn from [SouthWest Organizing Project](#) and [Rockaway Youth Taskforce](#) about how they use relationship with land as SEL.

CJSF and our partners conducted a deep dive together about culturally-affirming SEL through in-person and virtual learning exchanges, site visits, webinars, Twitter chats, conference calls, and the final development of this radport to share the year-long learning process. We collected survey and phone call data from our national network of partners to better understand how they define and do culturally-affirming SEL work in communities every day. We convened 40+ of our partner groups to engage in critical dialogue, examine and deconstruct SEL frameworks, and create space to dream and strategize together.

The next section of the radport details the stories we collected, analysis of the data from conversations and presentations, and major themes from how our partners conceptualize and exemplify SEL practices in their daily work.⁶

Why SEL?

Research shows the positive effects of social-emotional learning. For young people in particular, evidence highlights how young people with strong social and emotional skills have better school outcomes (e.g. improved test scores, grades, attendance, and graduation rates), increased confidence, healthy relationships, and a stronger connection to school.⁷ Safe and supportive school climates positively affect academic, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for young people.⁸ Importantly, SEL helps build and sustain schools centered in connectedness, transformative justice, and holistic safety.

For Black and Brown young people specifically, traumatic experiences, such as police brutality and the influx of racist incidents that flood media timelines without justice, are present in their everyday interactions and inside a space supposed to educate and liberate them. Schools often exacerbate the trauma and stressors of the world. Mental health services are scarce in schools across the country. The average counselor-to-student ratio across schools is 464 to 1, even though The American School Counselor Association recommends a minimum of one counselor for every 250 students.⁹ The lack of school social workers, school psychologists, and nurses is also jarring. Simply adding these positions is not enough. Counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, and nurses must also be actively anti-racist and anti-bias and use culturally-affirming practices in their work.



Zakiyah Ansari at MN Learning Exchange

Research shows us that stress makes it difficult to learn.¹⁰ Pulling from research in neuroscience, certain parts of the brain are responsible for understanding, noticing, and expressing emotions.

The amygdala in the brain processes emotions, stores memories of emotional reactions to certain situations and stimuli, and reacts to stress in a way that makes it nearly impossible for the brain to retain information. If young folks are stressed by over-surveillance in schools and communities, how can they process and retain information in the classroom? To create a container for SEL and for learning to happen, there has to be an opportunity to heal. As Dr. Monique Morris says, “Schools must become places of healing, so that they can become spaces of learning.” SEL doesn’t just focus on the trauma, but also the strengths. It ensures a sense of belonging through building a healthy individual and collective identity. It is healing-centered. [As Shawn Ginwright notes about healing-centered engagement](#), it can offer healing space through culturally grounded rituals, including learning about ancestors, participating in cultural traditions, and studying the rich history of resistance.

As Zakiyah Ansari, Advocacy Director for [Alliance for Quality Education](#) noted, “Nationally we are having more conversations about SEL during the pandemic but we must make sure that it is this collective definition centered in healing, not getting folks to work and the economy churning. Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students and families deserve an education system that will transform to meet the trauma, grief, and distrust that COVID-19 has relentlessly bestowed on their communities without relief. As schools are reopening -- hybrid or completely remote learning -- systemically incorporating SEL and culturally affirming education will be what will benefit students, families, educators and communities. With White House and other GOP leaders working to desensitize the nation’s death toll by engaging in “necropolitics¹¹,” SEL done right, thoughtfully and intentionally is vital.”

Problematizing Current Social-Emotional Learning Frameworks

SEL has the potential to be a tool for liberation, but current frameworks use it as a tool to police Black and Brown young people and perpetuate a settler colonialist state in school. SEL conversations, practices, and curricula are often based on

white, cisgender, heteropatriarchal, ableist norms and values, which further enact emotional and psychological violence onto Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ youth of color, in particular. The current narrative around SEL is that students must “manage” and “control” themselves and their emotions, conform and constrict their identities, and not express their fullest, most authentic selves. This narrative is troubling because we see the same policing aspects of physical violence shift to more covert forms of emotional and psychological violence and control.

Over [200 SEL programs](#) are used in classrooms and school districts across the United States and the world. One of the most widely used definitions is CASEL’s: “social-emotional learning is the process by which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” SEL is often discussed under or in partnership with conversations about school climate initiatives, whole child development, Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS), mindfulness, and restorative justice. SEL is also often discussed from a workforce development lens that emphasizes the importance of building the next generation of ‘workers,’ developing 21st-century skills, and positive behavior to conform to societal norms to succeed in school and the workplace.

SEL has long been about decreasing ‘problem’ behavior and making young people conform to the dominant behavior norms.

Under the guise of capitalism, the dominant workforce development framework of SEL encourages young people to stifle the very emotions that have long contributed to a history

of resistance, so that they can contribute to society as a worker. SEL has long been about decreasing ‘problem’ behavior and making young people conform to the dominant behavior norms. Words like ‘manage’ and ‘control’ are words commonly associated with transactional business and hegemony. SEL has even been described as “calm down and rewrite that angry email,” “empathy is at the root of customer service,” “don’t cry at work,” and “get what you want, get what you need—everyone still leaves happy.” These examples are coded language for suppressing important emotions and only privileging feelings that make others, namely those who hold privileged identities, comfortable.

Emotions like righteous anger have long been used as a tool to fuel movements that have and continue to propel our nation forward towards justice. For Black and Brown young people in particular, this messaging communicates that their rage isn’t warranted. It communicates to them that they should be complicit and content with the very systems that oppress them. As Audre Lorde told us about anger, [“Focused with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change.”](#)

Additionally, when Black and Brown children express joy, they are chastised and punished. For example, in 2019, four Black and Brown middle school girls in Binghamton, New York, were strip-searched -- physically violated and shamed -- because they had been acting “hyper” and “giddy¹².” This is just one of many examples of how Black and Brown young people are policed for expressing a wide range of emotions.

As part of SEL’s dominant framework, equity, justice, and culturally-affirming practices are relegated to being an add-on. Although the [transformative SEL framework](#), as defined by CASEL, is promising in its addition of critical consciousness as a key component of SEL, we argue that it shouldn’t simply be an addition, but rather at its core. Rather than being a framework or checklist, we view SEL as an orientation to relationship-building. The CASEL framework, even though it adopts the word transformative, continues to use language

such as “manage,” and “control.” The language of white supremacy and anti-Blackness underlies many SEL frameworks. When something has transformed, it can never go back to what it used to be. [Language is the “instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation.”](#) The workforce development framework is capitalist language and also the language of the oppressor. As Dena Simmons warns, SEL, without context and examination of racism and oppression, risks becoming [“white supremacy with a hug.”](#)

In classrooms and schools, this looks like forcing young people to practice mindfulness by remaining still and quiet, with their eyes closed. Requiring young people to close their eyes can be traumatic. Mindfulness focuses energy and attention on one task, which one could do during any daily task, such as washing hands, taking a test, or having a conversation. This communicates the message that children who may need to move their bodies before finding a seat are not welcome or accepted because they are not practicing “self awareness.” It is a form of control that polices the body, especially Black and Brown bodies, not to take up space. Rather, tools like [Village of Wisdom’s Racial Stress Coping Plan](#) for families are helpful resources to notice and observe stress when it appears in the body. It asks reflective questions such as: **“Where did you feel the stress in your body? My stress level is a ____ and I feel it in my ____ which ____.”** This brings the focus and emphasis back to noticing and understanding emotions and having a relationship with one’s body, rather than controlling the body signals’ important messages and feelings.

SEL as policing looks like having classroom rules posted on the wall that detail the five competencies of CASEL and having “Keep your hands to yourself. Don’t touch other people’s property,” as the example for social and cultural awareness. This is an example of how widely used frameworks can be co-opted and misused. Social and cultural awareness should be about unpacking bias, having critical dialogue, and developing justice-oriented solutions. It should be about critically analyzing historical narratives that privilege experiences taught from the perspective of colonizers. It’s about teaching the truth about history because truth-telling is a form of love.



Black Girls Matter Miami Panel

Where did you feel the stress in your body? **My stress level is a _____ and I feel it in my _____ which _____.**

It should also be about having conversations about boundaries, saying no, and consent to encourage young people to be vocal about boundaries and respect others' boundaries. For example, Dr. Monique Morris tells the story of Esperanza, a young person who experienced trauma in her community after she experienced violence in her neighborhood. Esperanza was supposed to speak at a conference,

but after feeling overwhelmed with processing the violence she experienced, she started to cry before she spoke. One of her friends came up to her and started braiding her hair, which soothed her tears, and as Morris describes, her spirit.¹³ Doing hair has long been used as a cultural practice for building communal and ancestral ties in Black and Brown communities. The two young people knew one another well enough to communicate non-verbally and read one another's body language. [Bettina Love discusses this level of social awareness in her TED Talk](#) as well, where young people at a cypher have be aware of others to truly listen to what they're saying, so they can comment on others' rhymes. They read non-verbal cues to know when it is their turn, which is an incredible exhibition of social awareness.

SEL as policing also looks like teaching a one-size-fits-all approach. In order to feel in control of the classroom at all times, educators resort to testing young people in standardized ways without considering the multiple ways they express their intelligence.¹⁴ **Why do we need to feel in control?** How will young people learn about their interests if there's no space to explore, uncover, ideate, or debate? How will young people discover and practice their gifts and talents if they are only told they can solve problems in one way?

Andrew Yeung, Economic Justice Manager at [RYSE Center](#), named that SEL has often been used as a compliance metric. Some of these systems will not be able to hold SEL because they were built on control. The history of schooling in the United States shows us this, where the factory model of education persists, which pushes standardization, devotion to nationalism without loving critique, and obedience. The narrative has long been that young people must change, rather than the system. If young people do not conform, they are disciplined and punished. This leaves little to no room for creativity, for reflection, and questioning of authority. Questioning authority means disrupting hegemonic systems.

Centering culturally-affirming SEL in schools directly challenges the capitalist and white-supremacist approach to schooling that is the status quo. The dominant message shares that we must be productive, that we are disposable, and that we only live to work. We must name the contradiction of schools as places where the capitalist class reproduces workers. Schools should be where young people learn about themselves and people's history as a liberatory practice aimed at communal freedom.

One of our partners said it best in the partner survey data that was collected in Summer 2020, "Embedding in the academic curriculum and the climate of the school, intentional development of skills that help kids become healthy, self-actualized members of their communities. This means students learn how to recognize their emotions, respond to conflict in healthy ways, learn communication skills, develop leadership skills,

etc. This must be culturally responsive because all of the above are subjective, so you can't have the dominant hetero, cis gender white ableist culture's view of what "good communication skills" are, for example, be the definition of success. Instead it would need to be grounded in the strengths of the students and their families and build from there. Without cultural responsiveness, it can be very colonialist or paternalistic."

When SEL is coupled with hardened environments, it becomes a lethal combination. When students are in classrooms, the curriculum and space are often not culturally affirming or sustaining and continues to be violent to their family, ancestors, and historical contributions. This is how SEL is another mechanism for emotionally policing students.

Culturally-Affirming SEL: A Path Forward

There's another way to approach school safety—using culturally affirming SEL to create deep connections with students, staff, and administrators. If it's not culturally-affirming, it's not SEL. If SEL doesn't celebrate and affirm an individual's unique cultural strengths, gifts, and talents, it does not encourage them to be self aware. If SEL doesn't actively interrogate Eurocentric ideas of control, particularly self-control, it is not SEL. If SEL doesn't ask: **Whose social norms are we abiding by?** It's not SEL. If it doesn't allow both young people and adults to bring their full humanity into schools, mistakes and all, it is not asking them to learn about their social and emotional skills. It is asking them to accommodate white supremacy and heteropatriarchy.

Culturally-Affirming
↓
counternarrative

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

young folx
people don't agree

SEL is the process through which children ^(process) and adults ^{recognize?} ~~understand~~ and manage emotions, ^{personal & collective} ~~set and achieve~~ ^{strive toward} positive goals, feel and show empathy, ^{embrace failures & lessons} ~~establish and maintain~~ positive relationships, ^{Liberation} ~~and make responsible(?)~~ decisions, ^{with our selves, our lead, our community} ~~and ...~~ ^{learn to understand} ~~dream the world we deserve~~ into being ...

^{points to talk to diverse audiences} ^{short definition (one sentence)} ^{examples & counterexamples} ^{leaving areas blank leaving space on what it means}

^{steps} ^{recipe} ^{visuals} ^{pictures}

^{homophobia} ^{heteropatriarchy} ^{is primary} ^{language} ^{neurodiversity} ^{ableism}

* As defined by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

When we began the Community of Practice, most of our partners did not call the set of skills ‘social-emotional learning.’ Still, it is a part of their work and how they approach organizing through deep relationship-building and creating space for love, healing, trust, joy, justice, and liberation. For Jessica Rucker, high school educator at E.L. Haynes and member of [D.C. Area Educators for Social Justice](#), SEL felt like bus stop cyphers, where she learned about the attitudes, beliefs, and ways about how people get along as a form of self and social awareness. It was the lyrics in hip hop that helped her to deepen her political and social analysis. It was music that taught her the history that she wasn’t taught in schools. For Deysi Chacon, Education Engagement Advocate at RYSE Center, SEL was about re-investing in her community through organizing. From Deysi’s perspective, traditional models of SEL are used as a reactionary response in schools, rather than as a tool to build and invest in spaces to heal and claim power. *SEL should be about building relationships to sustain movements.*

“I didn’t always know what culturally-affirming SEL was, but I knew what it looked like and felt like.”

– Zakiyah Ansari, Advocacy Director, Alliance for Quality Education

In July 2019, we convened 25+ folks from multiple partner organizations in Long Beach, California, to learn from Californians for Justice and their Relationship-Centered Schools model. As part of the learning exchange, we placed the CASEL definition of SEL on paper on the wall in our meeting room. We encouraged partners to take their pens to physically rewrite a new definition that illustrated their work and their communities’ needs. The definition below is the remixed definition that our partners created that week.

Culturally-affirming SEL collective definition

Culturally-affirming SEL is the process through which people of all ages:

- **Recognize and process** emotions
- **Set and strive** toward personal/collective goals and liberation, while embracing failures as lessons
- **Feel and show** empathy
- **Establish and maintain** positive relationships with ourselves, our land, and our community
- **Make** collective decisions
- **Identify** the intersections between the -isms (including colonialism, white supremacy, antiBlackness, homophobia, cispremac, linguicism, ableism, and all forms of oppression)
- **Dream** the world we deserve into being

Historically, we’ve seen how theories of SEL are deeply ingrained in movements -- movements like the Black Freedom Struggle. In 1966, the Black Panther Party released their Ten-Point Program. The fifth point stated: *“We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society. We believe in an educational system that will give our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.”* Almost 55 years later, organizers are still fighting for this demand. We situate and ground this work in the reality that organizers have been demanding for a long time what schools should look and feel like. In a virtual learning exchange, our partners listed out a set of demands of what they want SEL to be, based on the Black Panther Party 10 Point Program, specifically the fifth point.

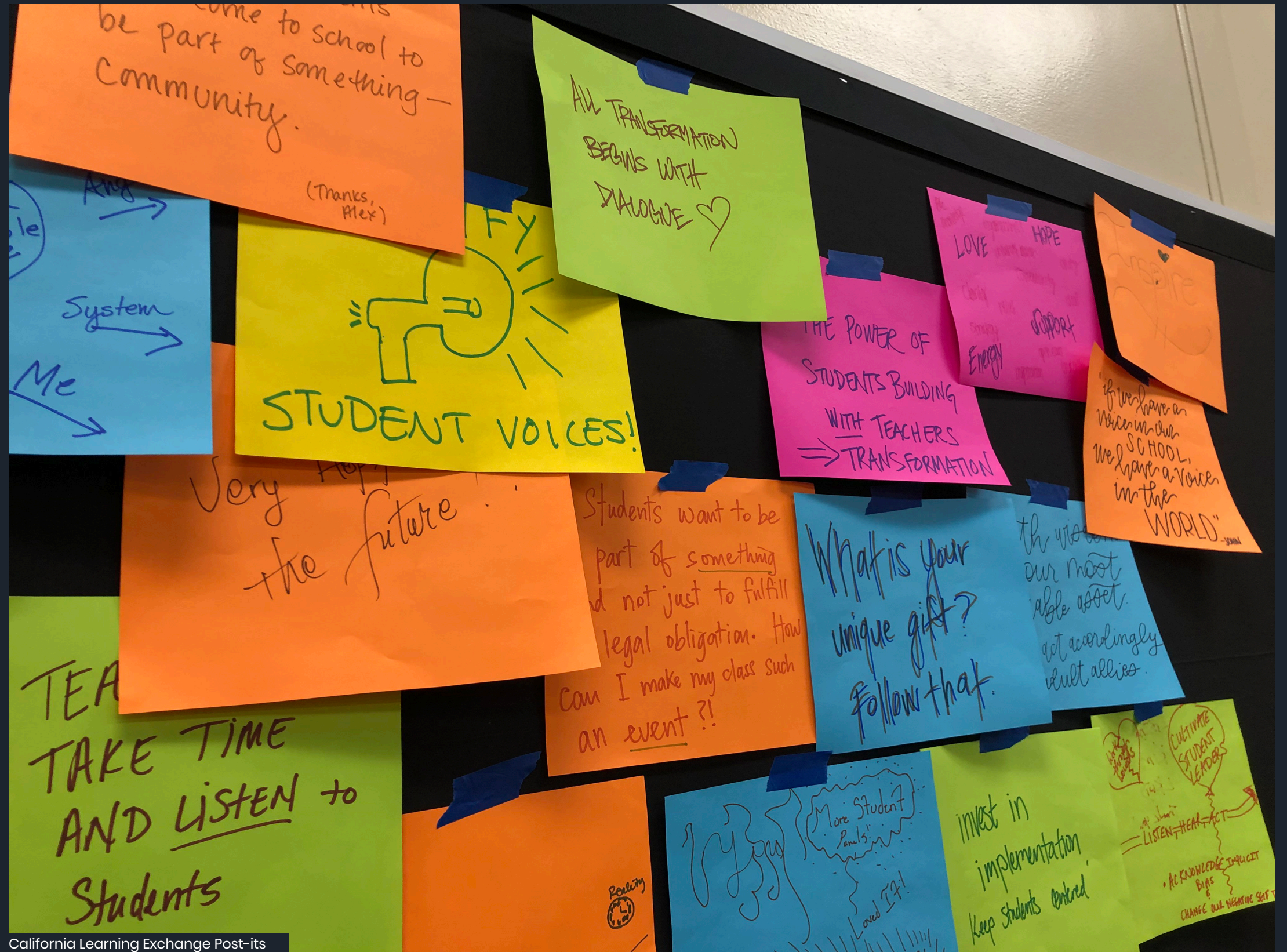
Eight SEL Demands (Based on the Black Panther Party 10 Point Program)

1. We want SEL to be centered in what young people of color SAY they need, not what we ASSUME will make them into what we want them to be
2. We want to make our own rules when it comes to culturally affirming practices
3. We want education that gives us opportunities to learn about and connect to the land we occupy
4. We demand room to grow. Who you see before you (in classrooms, etc.) is not who I once was and not who I may ultimately be. See me and support my potential (or at least get out of my way)
5. We want the making of amends for the harm on our youth, specifically who are most marginalized through education
6. We want culturally affirming SEL to be rooted in the indigenous practices from whence it came! Name it!
7. We want SEL to invest and nourish the various skills, talents and visions that young people have, with compassion and care, while providing the resources for them to do
8. We want SEL education to uplift the voices of our young people and collectively heal and care for one another

What We've Learned

What is culturally-affirming SEL and what does it look like in practice?

Culturally-affirming SEL is centered in deep relationship-building. When asked what makes them feel safe in school, our partners resounded, “relationships.” Relationships are a prerequisite to learning. SEL is about relationships -- how we come to identify and understand ourselves, our relationships with our emotions, our relationships with others -- in service of equity and justice. Organizers exemplify relationship-building through the power of base-building. Relationships mean investment in communities and people. Base-building and relationship-building take time, understanding, conflict resolution, and trust-building.



California Learning Exchange Post-its

From our partner survey data, one partner highlighted the role of relationships in creating safe spaces: “The philosophy that guides our work is that caring, emphatic, and respectful relationships are at the center of emotional and social change and a key component to success in our program, our society, and world. Engaging young people as partners in community changes gives our young people a greater feeling of safety and belonging, a heightened sense of confidence and self-efficacy, a deep understanding of, and connection to, their peers and the broader community... The result of this philosophy ...is a space where young people feel prepared to tackle injustices, but also feel safe experiencing a variety of emotions – exhaustion, frustration, relief, giddiness – without being made to feel that they are distracting the group from “the work.”

Najla Gomez Rodriguez, Capacity Building Manager with [Californians for Justice \(CFJ\)](#), shared that **embedding** SEL in schools means drawing from student culture and lived experience to develop learning. [Californians for Justice’s Relationship-Centered Schools model](#) is rooted in: **1) valuing student voice** (e.g., collaboration between students, administrators, and teachers through youth-driven design teams to develop new practices) **2) investing in staff** (e.g., providing staff professional development on SEL and unconscious bias); and **3) creating space for relationship-building** (e.g., creating advisory structures where students stay with a caring adult all of their years of high school). In California, CFJ has learned that students can lead Professional Development for teachers on implicit bias and the importance of implementing SEL in an empowering and effective way. CFJ’s Relationship-Centered Schools work stems from findings from a participatory action research study conducted with young people that showed that 1 in 3 students in California could not name a single caring adult at school. SEL shouldn’t be seen as an additional practice, but rather a core component of schooling where students co-design curriculum and give input about what they want and need in school.

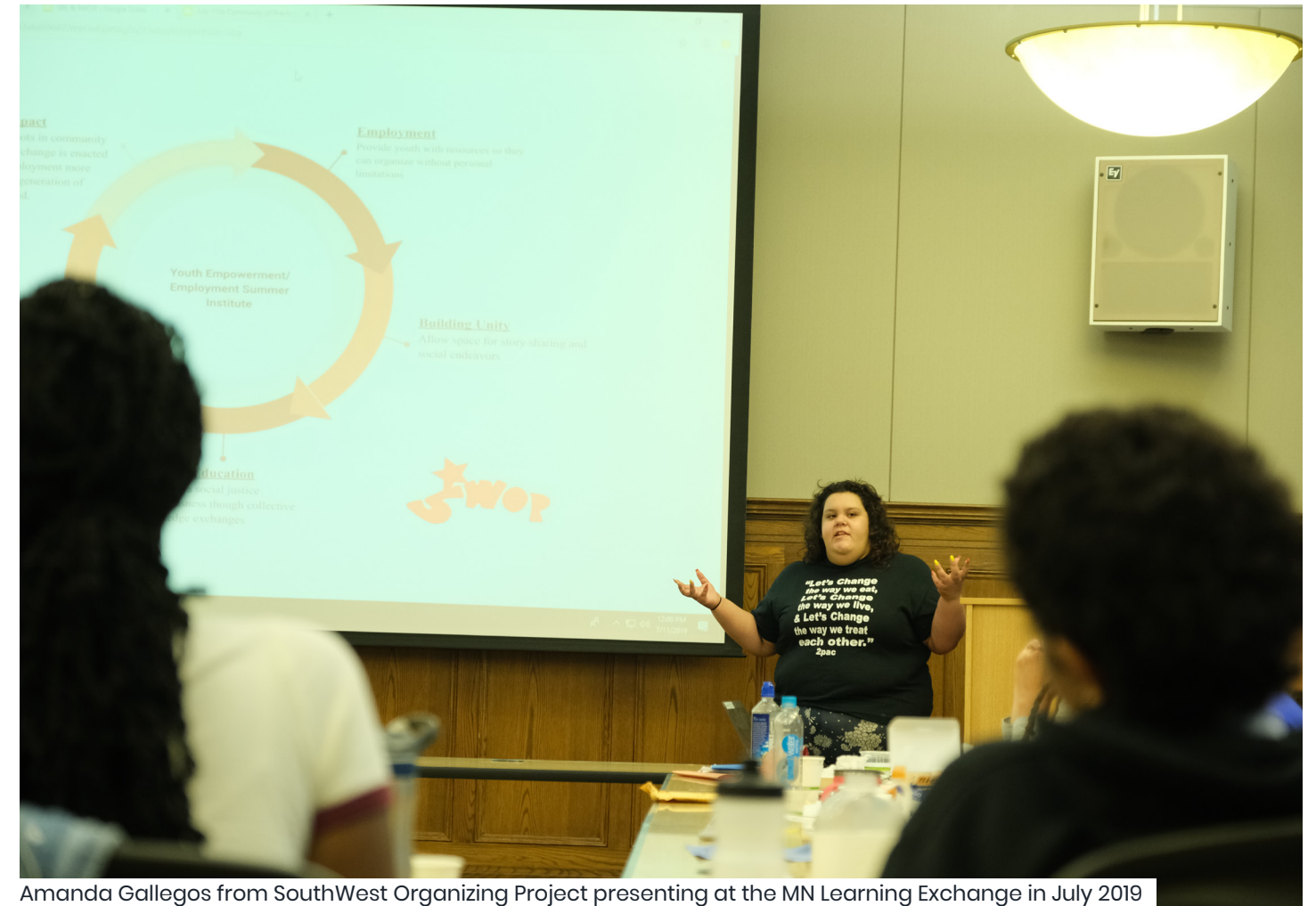
Partners like [CADRE in Southern Los Angeles, California](#), organize parents and build a base by understanding parent strengths and building

relationships with and among parents to see the humanity in families. They build relationships by canvassing in neighborhoods to reach parents who do not frequent school campuses and then hold house meetings to discuss some of the challenges they see in the school system. They continue to deepen relationships through training, but also provide parents with a structured peer support system. Schools that are truly centered in SEL cannot take on a deficit view of parents, families, caregivers, and schools cannot be a fortress.

Culturally-affirming SEL is a connection not just to ourselves and with others, but our relationships with the land, our ancestors, our spirituality, our communities, and our connections to our joys and passions. It’s rooted in mutual love and respect.

[SouthWest Organizing Project \(SWOP\)](#) in Albuquerque, New Mexico, uses community gardening through their initiative [Project Feed the Hood](#). This project provides safe spaces for students of color to learn about native food justice practices and develop relationships with land that has historically been stolen from Indigenous people. They reclaim the land by building consciousness -- the ability to understand nature. While we typically think of SEL as relationships with self or others, community organizing groups like SWOP center it in the land.

In a presentation on food justice, land sovereignty, and SEL at the NoVo Foundation and Education First SEL in Action convening, Amanda Gallegos from SWOP and Andrea Colon from Rockaway Youth Taskforce (RYTF) shared a lesson on food mapping. They shared that food is important in every culture, so they began by asking attendees to share their favorite foods that remind them of home. The lesson then took us through the life of a jar of salsa, beginning with naming the ingredients that you and your family use -- from tomatoes to onions to chiles. Amanda asked critical questions such as: Where do these vegetables come from? Who grows them and picks them? How do they get from the farm to the factory? How much gas emits from the truck that brings the crops to the factory? This lesson not only discusses food justice, but also climate justice and environmental justice. The lesson builds



Amanda Gallegos from SouthWest Organizing Project presenting at the MN Learning Exchange in July 2019

relationships between participants and develops an understanding of our relationship to land and the broader impact on the climate and environment.

[Youth on Board’s ListeningWorks](#) is a national healing project aimed at strengthening organizational and movement culture through SEL. Listening Partnerships can be used as a tool for wholehearted listening to encourage a comfortable space for a partner to say whatever is on their mind without offering feedback or advice -- a strategy for deep relationship-building. As much of SEL focuses on relationship-building, ListeningWorks provides a powerful model for how to not only build deep relationships, but sustain them through authentic listening, radical vulnerability, and love. It is a tangible model and strategy to use for adults to practice SEL for themselves and maintain a level of self and communal care. Educators, school staff, and young people can use Listening Partnerships in

classrooms. Youth on Board’s ListeningWorks uses four support skills that can be used in classrooms and schools as tangible skills for creating healing-centered spaces and deepening relationships: **1) Listening partnerships**, **2) Appreciations and setting up a culture of appreciations**, **3) Laugh, play, and games**, and **4) Community & Healing Circles**.

During our first #SELWebinarSeries webinar on *What is Culturally-Affirming SEL?* Youth on Board discussed how self-care, radical love, and collective care are revolutionary because, as Carlos Rojas, Director of Education Justice & ListeningWorks said, **“the system tells us we cannot feel to keep us from healing.”** Investing in SEL means providing opportunities and outlets for young people to heal and for adults to process through and heal from trauma. SEL for adults is equally important because it provides strategies and tools to critically reflect on unconscious bias, listen and connect to others,

and build stronger and more positive relationships with ourselves and others. SEL practices are done best when everyone is practicing SEL.

Adult allies also have to practice SEL, critically reflect, step aside, and truly let young folks lead. At our #SELWebinarSeries webinar on *SEL Beyond the Checklist*, Andrew Yeung, Economic Justice Program Manager at RYSE shared that adult allies must “Walk alongside [young people] for freedom and liberation.” Jessica Rucker, high school teacher at E.L. Haynes in Washington D.C. and member of D.C. Area Educators for Social Justice shared some of her teaching ideas, including this homework prompt: *Find a cultural artifact that shows something about you and your life*. This prompt, she reflected, helped the young people she works with realize they have cultural artifacts and are curators of knowledge.

At RYSE, they held a youth-led town hall to hold space for young people to respond to social, cultural, and educational needs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and “distance learning,” in addition to other virtual community-building spaces. Culturally-affirming SEL is about encouraging young people to share their emotions, thoughts, and feelings, and as Jessica said, “They don’t need to be taught. I invite them.”

SEL can’t be considered another “add-on.”

SEL is not a curriculum; it’s a practice embedded into every aspect of the school day. There is allotted “SEL Time,” where there is a focused lesson on a particular skillset in many schools. This practice presents the false narrative that noticing and observing our emotions, building relationships, and recognizing stress should only be acknowledged during specific periods of the day, which further contributes to the harmful “management” and “control” narrative. Many school districts are rushing to purchase the “most effective” SEL curricula as a bandaid that will not heal the deep wounds that punitive school policies have inflicted. Schools should embed SEL in the framework of all aspects of the school day, from building relationships to having

a curriculum that is reflective of young peoples’ experiences to school climate and restorative justice practices that promote connectedness.

Centering inquiry-based work in culturally-affirming SEL is a powerful tool to expand pedagogical practices to infuse SEL into teaching, rather than regarding it as just an add-on. In the #SELWebinarSeries webinar on *SEL Beyond the Checklist*, the panelists shared that SEL should also be about encouraging constant and growing curiosity. Andrew Yeung (RYSE) shared that SEL should incorporate inquiry -- how do we ask questions about how we are forming our sense of self? He said it’s about grappling with the roots and examining questions like: what does it mean to be self-aware in a white settler colonialist system? Jessica (high school teacher and DCAESJ member) said that as an educator, she is devoted to making sure her classroom space is a place for exchanging ideas and asking questions to connect history, current events, and the future.

In a webinar on *When Black Lives Matter at School: Educators & Organizers Building Relationships in Schools*, educators and organizers emphasized the need for school curriculum, pedagogy, policies, and supports that examine structural racism and highlight intersectional Black identities, Black history, and anti-racism. Caneisha Mills, middle school teacher at Hardy Middle School and co-organizer of the People’s History Working Group of D.C. Area Educators for Social Justice, said that her teaching strategy is to not start by teaching oppression/racism. Rather, Caneisha starts with the heroes and the creativity, brilliance, and the impact of Black people and Black communities. This learning must extend beyond one month a year and highlight more than a few figures. I-Ra Abubaker, Senior Program Coordinator at [Critical Exposure](#), shared that in school, she needed to see herself reflected in the curriculum, and even when she asked for it, the school ignored it. We must not inflict curricular violence on Black and Brown students, but rather amplify the many ways they contribute critical knowledge.

Youth on Board, in partnership with Boston Public Schools, runs the [Boston Student Advisory Council \(BSAC\)](#). BSAC is the student union of the district. They advise the School Committee and Superintendent on district policy by putting youth on district Boards of Education. They work with Boston Public Schools to redefine what SEL and wellness look like by situating culturally and linguistically sustaining practices¹⁵ into every aspect of schooling including curriculum development, institutional work, and ensuring that students are engaged in every step of policy development. Through their [Youth Empowered Learning: CLSP Learning Series](#), they provide a powerful framework for centering the cultural knowledge and practices of young people, families, and communities. Together, young people and adults co-facilitate workshops designed by young people that focus on self-identity, countering bias and racism through an analysis of historical and current contexts, and provide interactive skill-building opportunities for advocacy and direct action.

[Leaders Igniting Transformation \(LIT\)](#) is a youth of color-led organizing group based in Milwaukee, WI that focuses on three core programs: **1)** ending the school-to-prison pipeline; **2)** economic justice; and **3)** justice reinvestment. Through their Black Hogwarts political education program, each “house” is dedicated to a specific area of the young person’s interest. Young people select a training or “house” they’d like to be a part of. For example, Slytherin includes workshops for students running for office and organizing 101; Gryffindor includes workshops on storytelling and how to engage with your local government; Hufflepuff includes workshops on art and the role of art in activism; and Ravenclaw prepares high school leaders to testify at the Milwaukee Public School Budget Town Hall. LIT partners with local organizations like [Ubuntu Research and Evaluation](#) and [Diverse and Resilient](#). Since it’s a youth-led organization, older leaders mentor younger leaders through the process. This innovative programming introduces youth to the “magic” of leadership and organizing. This work highlights how learning can promote creativity to deepen social awareness.

Culturally-affirming SEL is centered in healing justice and emotional justice.

Communal healing is central to safety. When students, caregivers, school staff, and communities come into school buildings, they want to feel mentally, physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe. I-Ra Abubaker (Critical Exposure) said in our #SELWebinarSeries, “When one of us isn’t safe, none of us are safe.” How do we continue to create spaces that are healing, so that everyone can feel safe, supported, and affirmed in their humanity? The work of healing our minds, bodies, and hearts from the systems of oppression requires intentional commitment.¹⁶ Transformative organizing is healing-centered engagement.

Labor Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles, California said, “Many of our members suffer so many societal traumas rooted in racial, gender, and national oppression. We work with a model influenced by Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*.¹⁷ Fanon argued that the pain of colonialism could only be healed in the self-actualization of the oppressed in the battle against colonialism itself. For us, this led so many of our members to a heightened sense of societal awareness and self-love and acceptance.”

Culturally-affirming SEL requires emotional justice -- the process of unpacking and dismantling Emotional Patriarchy.¹⁸ While emotions have been used to profit and privilege some and punish others, emotional justice provides language to describe emotions, name, explore, and develop a counter-narrative around emotions, specifically emotions related to historical and intergenerational trauma.

[Communities United](#) engages a [Healing through Justice](#) framework, which details three actions to take both individually (identity-building) and collectively (social action): **1)** The Recognition of My Resilience-Empowering Myself: I am who

I say I am 2) Heroic Living-I am a Weaver of Empathy, Knowledge, & Action and 3) Building Justice-Centered Heroic Communities through Action. One of the recent projects that focused on transformative healing work is their [WOKE \(Working on Knowledge & Equity\) Project](#). The WOKE Project centers the leadership of educators and low-income students of color in advancing dynamic approaches to collectively develop and implement curriculum that centers students and their communities' lived experiences. The WOKE Project approach blends social-emotional learning grounded in positive youth development, restorative practices, and relevant and engaging learning opportunities tied to pressing issues in the community.

[Youth BreakOUT!](#) in New Orleans, Louisiana runs intergenerational healing nights and pillowtalks for LGBTQ+ communities. They've developed an intensive Healing Justice Plan for BreakOUT! with a defined role for the Healing as Resilience Together Committee, which includes monthly coaching, reflection, and healing modalities study.



Minnesota Learning Exchange – Kathiana Vixema and Natasha Viera- Santana (SOUL Sisters Leadership Collective)

[BOP's People's Plan](#) calls for the expansion of culturally rooted, healing-centered “rites of passage” programs for all high school and middle schools, including scaling a range of culturally-rooted healing practices and trauma-informed approaches across all schools in the district. One of their recommendations to do this work well is to initiate mapping of community partners to collaborate with on the planning and facilitation of programming for and with young people.

Groups like [SOUL Sisters Leadership Collective](#) in Miami, Florida provide programming in which young women, femmes, and gender non-binary youth of color can express themselves through identifying issues in their communities and developing arts-based action projects with the love and support of a mentor. Natasha Santana-Viera, former Miami Program Manager at SOUL Sisters, noted in the virtual learning exchange on *SEL Beyond the Checklist* that their [Principles & Personalities](#) are what SEL in action looks like to SOUL Sisters. Some examples of their Principles & Personalities include: Sankofa (our past informs our future), hope & transformation (change is possible), and cultural awareness (deep knowledge of our cultural backgrounds supports our growth and healing). SEL is embedded not only in the way they create and conduct programming, but how they operate as an organization.

This is exemplified in a vignette written by Wakumi Douglas, co-founder of S.O.U.L Sisters Leadership Collective in Monique Morris' (2019) [Sing a Rhythm, Dance a Blues: Education for the Liberation of Black and Brown Girls](#). Douglas discussed one of their programs that teaches Black and Brown girls and transgender, non-conforming youth about sexual and reproductive health.

As she described the program, she said:

...they want to change things that are going on in the schools, but they also want to have fun and be free – and that's also radical and revolutionary for them. (Morris, 2019, p. 140)

When young people, namely Black and Brown young people, take up space and express

themselves in places not built for them to thrive, they resist the oppressive forces that often take away the joy and fun of learning. They reclaim those spaces by expressing happiness, an integral part of the healing process. At RYSE Center, they reclaim public space for young people to play, laugh, and enjoy music. They also create other experiences like Richmond Renaissance, where young people explore the Black diaspora in Richmond in the 1940s as a means of placemaking and belonging. Using art as a transformative opportunity to teach, analyze connections, and heal is a powerful opportunity to deepen SEL practices.

Another key component of culturally-affirming SEL is engaging in wholehearted listening and story-sharing as liberatory practices to be heard, heal, and express joy. Jessica Rucker (high school teacher and DCAESJ) discussed how one of her lessons focused on dreaming with young people. She used Solange's *Things I Imagined* and this [CodeSwitch podcast episode on Octavia Butler's work](#) to set the foundation for young people to conduct oral histories of this moment (i.e., COVID-19 and continued racial injustice). Jessica encouraged them to interview those they live with and listen to their stories. [She also used Jay Z's Minority Report to invite young people to write their reports about the connections between the government's response to Hurricane Katrina and COVID-19.](#)

There is great power in images to tell the stories we're not always able to put into words. Critical Exposure, an organizing group in Washington, D.C., trains youth to use photography, visual storytelling, and advocacy to make tangible change in their schools and communities. They are “creating a new generation of civic leaders who have: the tools to express themselves; The creativity to imagine new solutions to old problems; The belief that youth have the right and ability to fight for those solutions; and The skills to hold communities and public officials accountable.” Critical Exposure partners with D.C. high schools and youth share their photos through exhibitions in galleries, libraries, and present the images directly to public officials. Through the documentation of their communities through their own lenses, they share their counter-narratives with the world and use art as a transformative tool for healing and collective power.

Activist and writer [adrienne maree brown](#) says, “All social justice work is science fiction. We are imagining a world free of injustice that doesn't yet exist.” SEL has the potential to encourage young people to freedom dream.¹⁹ Part of freedom dreaming requires creativity without boundaries and critical imagination of resistance. In schools that often stifle and try to suppress creative invention and critical inquiry in the name of order and control, the healing process also requires imaginative freedom. SEL must be a lever for healing and emotional justice. As evidenced through the many examples that our partners provide, healing is essential to movement work. Healing and rest are vital for sustained action. Still, if SEL does not uplift the necessary power of healing, it teaches young people to instead conform to capitalist structures that deny their humanity.

SEL looks different in different contexts. This is why we must lean into communities.

In places like Juneau and Nome, Alaska, SEL is embedded into their cultural safety model, which they adapted from indigenous practices in New Zealand. Cultural safety in Alaska means not having too much food waste at lunch because it is directly in conflict with the community's and Elders' cultural values. Further, it means providing traditional foods like moose and seal stew, rather than the nutrient-deficit meals often provided and served through the federally-funded school meal programs. Cultural safety means young people learn their indigenous languages and Native Alaskan history from Elders and community members as part of their core curriculum. It also includes being able to wear their traditional clothing to graduation ceremonies. We must highlight the language, practices, customs, and history of the people and local communities. SEL should honor indigenous traditions to ensure that schools are culturally safe.



Zakiyah Ansari at the Alaska Site Visit in Nome, Alaska

In places like Albuquerque, New Mexico, organizations like SWOP have community-school partnerships. “SWOP established a partnership with Van Buren and Washington Middle Schools, which allowed SWOP to provide workshops in food and environmental justice work through a transformative justice lens and through mindful, culturally-based approaches to work with young people of color. These middle schools reached out to SWOP for assistance in creating programming that would engage community partners in a school-wide project to compel students to engage with their schools more and create ways for students to connect with groups and organizations rooted in their communities. SWOP worked with teachers at Washington Middle School to create a year-long environmental justice curriculum tied to national educational standards that included a school-wide environmental justice tour and several project-based learning opportunities. At Van Buren Middle School, SWOP worked to institutionalize a food justice program. The program includes a

garden elective for students, in-school suspension conducted in the school garden, and anti-racism and food justice training for faculty. Through these efforts, they have helped Van Buren to become one of only two schools in the entire district that are certified garden-to-cafeteria, with staff and students trained to produce, harvest, and safely process food for cafeteria consumption.” When schools lean into the expertise of communities, it has transformative effects for all.

Amid COVID-19, our partners continue to serve as the cornerstone for their communities through mutual aid efforts. At SWOP, they have been raising money for small grassroots organizations that are sewing masks -- many of the organizations employ homeless, migrant, or refugee status workers in their communities. In places like Miami, Florida, organizers like Logan Meza, Lead Organizer at SOUL Sisters Leadership Collective, pull communities together by coordinating mutual aid networks, cook food for those who need it, and provide masks and supplies. Logan says about mutual aid, “This isn’t charity, it allows us to meet our needs without saviorism and hierarchy.”

Kesi Foster, Lead Organizer at [Make the Road – New York](#) said, “Our organization was already doing the mutual aid work. It’s very much grounded in our organizing. People come to our organizations because the state does not provide them care. Young people come to our organizations because they’ve been pushed to the margins where they are not provided care. All of our organizations have been doing that silent work of fighting for and bringing care to our communities.”

SEL is about communal care. It’s mutual aid. It’s about giving without any expectations or transactions. It’s about developing a deep collective identity that allows everyone to have their needs met through a mutual sharing of resources. It’s about using your talents and strengths to ensure your community is cared for. It’s about honoring the rich traditions of communities and creating relationships with those traditions and rituals.

SEL builds critical consciousness.

Many of our community partners use political education to provide their communities with a deeper understanding of people’s perspectives and truths. Through political education, everyone has something to contribute as well as are experts of their own experiences. To be socially aware, one must know their history -- the full history. At a time where only 8–9% of class time is devoted to Black history and Black history is often relegated to one month and a few heroic figures, classroom curriculum and corporate textbooks erase the strategic organizing efforts of Black and Brown communities and allies.²⁰ At this moment, there are blatant and vicious attacks on social justice education and teaching people’s history by the 45th presidential administration. President Trump said he will create a commission to promote “patriotic education,” which preserves teaching the narratives that uphold white supremacy. Critical consciousness is vital to fight back against the attempted erasure and suppression of the actual history that provides illustrative examples of resistance and rebellion. SEL has the potential to help communities build the skills necessary to have brave conversations across differences, address the sociopolitical context, and confront injustice.²¹ SEL can develop young people and adults to not only be consumers of knowledge, but critical producers of knowledge and justice actors.

[Gwinnett STOPP](#) in Gwinnett County, Georgia has been using [Facebook Live](#) amidst COVID-19 to offer political education through a series called *Education System in Crisis*. One of the topics they covered, as an example, included *Still Separate and Unequal* on disparities in education, including how school funding works, disparities in college readiness, and disparities in AP and honors course enrollment for Black and Brown young people.

For [Desis Rising Up and Moving \(DRUM\)](#) in New York City, New York, their [Building Power and Safety through Solidarity Campaign](#) took their in-person base building to phone building during the global pandemic. Through phone, video, texts, and social media, they share crucial information about health

updates and connections to resources, education around the concept of power to organize around direct actions, and building connections, specifically during a time of isolation.

The [Zinn Education Project](#), coordinated by our partner [Teaching for Change](#), created [People’s Historians Online](#), a virtual mini-series. The series covered the Black Freedom Struggle, which brought together hundreds of educators, young people, and organizers from across the country. These sessions featured a historian in conversation with an educator to discuss the historical context of topics like the Civil Rights Movement in the North, Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, and the historical roots of the 2020 rebellion. As part of the sessions, attendees left with both a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the topic, but pedagogical strategies to use in their classrooms and communities. Additionally, they offer free, downloaded lessons and articles for teachers to “teach beyond the textbook.” Many of these lessons include interactive activities like role plays and tribunals. Participating in role plays increases empathy, a core component of SEL, because participants step into another person’s lived experiences.

For younger students, children’s books can be a tool for political education and understanding social-emotional skills. Carefully selecting and analyzing children’s texts can provide what Rudine Sims Bishop called “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” to readers’ multilayered and intersectional identities.²² Children’s literature can be a window to show young people what the possibility of new or different worlds could look like. Sliding glass doors encourage young people to use their imaginations to enter those worlds or take action. Teaching for Change also launched a [Freedom Reads: Anti-Bias Book Talk](#) series, which is part anti-bias training and part book review. Each short segment explores anti-bias books for the home and the classroom to strengthen parents’ and teachers’ anti-bias, anti-racism lens, and their ability to critically analyze children’s media. Children’s books can be a starting point for young people to see how others understand emotions, talk about their feelings, and identify with social issues.

Many partners also use participatory action research (PAR) and youth participatory action research (YPAR) as tools for communities to collect data and research their experiences through a social justice lens. This practice redefines who has the expertise to produce knowledge by using research findings to contribute to societal change that directly impacts communities. [Teachers Unite](#) in New York City, New York conducted a PAR study on rethinking school safety. They examined who gets to be involved in policy-making decisions around school safety. Young people drafted, revised, and tested over 200 interview questions about restorative/transformational justice, safety, accountability, discipline, and intersectionality.

In another YPAR study conducted by Dr. Venus Evans-Winters with the Sisters in [Strength program at Girls for Gender Equity](#), youth researchers in the program designed a guiding framework, which they called radical black feminism, to study the policies and practices in their school that led to racial and gender violence. The researchers used performance and art to “unscript their bodies,” in order words tell their stories through research. The co-researchers rewrote their lives’ scripts to show the validity and importance of their experiences. The youth researchers also concluded that policing girls’ bodies was used to suppress their cultural identities in school. They presented their findings to school staff and administrators to change school policies’ punitive nature that police and punish Black girls.²³

These practices can be adopted in the classroom to build social and emotional skills development by encouraging critical inquiry as the foundation for exploring social issues and our relationships to the broader sociopolitical context. For example, young people can be encouraged to conduct interviews or collect oral histories from people in their families or communities on a particular topic that is important to them. They could record their group conversations about a topic that’s meaningful to them and collectively code the transcripts together to see what common words, themes, or phrases come out of the data. They could present the data to their school board or at a town hall or create social media posts or flyers to spread awareness.

Through this process, young people see themselves as researchers and understand how they can use their knowledge to create actionable solutions.

Political education is about storytelling and examining narratives. SEL provides the necessary skills to examine the narratives that make up this nation’s fabric, particularly the narratives that have upheld anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and other forms of oppression. SEL offers a foundation for turning knowledge and empathy into action. Organizers exemplify this practice in their political education and participatory work every day.

Conversations about culturally-affirming SEL must center **LGBTQ+ students, girls, immigrant students, and youth with (dis)abilities** at the intersections of justice.

Too often in conversations about creating inclusive school environments, those most marginalized by society are left out of the conversation. In SEL conversations, in particular, much of the discussion decenters those who live at the margins of interlocking systems of oppression with multiple, oppressed identities.²⁴ To create a supportive environment for all students, we must concern ourselves with students that face multiple forms of oppression (e.g, Black girls, queer students of color). To build a strong sense of self- and collective identity and create school communities that are inclusive and affirming, schools must ensure that all young people feel a sense of safety. It’s not SEL if it’s discriminatory or is only culturally-affirming for some young people and not all.



This practice redefines who has the expertise to produce knowledge by using research findings to contribute to societal change that directly impacts communities.

[Power U](#) has a [Safe Schools for All campaign youth committee](#) that holds school board members accountable for ensuring schools are safe for all by fighting for: implementation of a comprehensive sex education curriculum which includes discussions on consent, sexual harassment, and is LGBTQ+ affirming; more funding for “Trust Counselors” and staff that allow students to feel safer and supported; and to ensure that pregnant teens and young parents receive appropriate child care resources.

[GSA Network](#) works to protect and expand access to GSA Clubs in schools across the country. GSA Clubs are student-run organizations that bring together LGBTQ+ and allied youth to learn about and organize around issues that affect their communities. They provide a safe and protective space against harassment, as well as a space for activism and direct action. Just the presence of a GSA improves connections to the school experience among LGBTQ+ students, whether or not they participate in the GSA.²⁵

Schools and classrooms must also be spaces where LGBTQ+ young people feel seen, valued, and affirmed. Educators and school staff should address young people by their names and pronouns. The curriculum should reflect queer and trans history and contributions. Young people should never be separated in classroom activities by “boys” and “girls,” but rather use LGBTQ+ inclusive and gender-sensitive curriculum and language. Schools should have gender-neutral restrooms. The physical space must be inclusive and safe.

Californians for Justice suggests investing in staff by having LGBQ/TGNC Support Liaisons to have someone LGBTQ+ young people could go to for support. Additionally, CFJ recommends that staff trainings should focus explicitly on TGBQ/TGNC communities to build safer school climates. Districts and schools must support educators in on-going reflection and awareness of how practices and curriculum can negatively impact young people.²⁶

[Juntos](#) is a community-led, Latinx immigrant organization in South Philly fighting for human rights as workers, parents, youth, and immigrants.

They have trained over 450 school counselors, teachers, and English Language Learners (ELL) teachers on how to best support undocumented youth with college access and various issues from cultural competency, language access, to the criminalization of youth of color. Through their Community Resistance Zones, Juntos teaches community members how to defend their and their neighbors’ rights in regards to ICE and police. They [developed a curriculum](#) that teaches how policies throughout history include and exclude populations based on the capitalist demand for exploitative labor. The curriculum uses storytelling and reflection to develop empathy, increase knowledge of self and community, and build a sense of community responsibility. This communal practice of social awareness and protecting one another is SEL in action.

[Padres & Jóvenes Unidos \(PJU\)](#) is a multi-issue organization in Denver, Colorado, led by low-income people of color who work for educational equity, racial justice, immigrant rights and quality healthcare for all. PJU’s Justice Reinvestment policy efforts led to the Colorado legislature approving the [“Colorado K-5 Social and Emotional Health Act”](#) that provides up to 10 schools participation in a pilot program that ensures that a school mental health professional is dedicated to each of grades K – 5. The pilot program is targeted to schools with high poverty rates, ethnic diversity, and a significant concentration of students in the foster care system.

The oppression that Black and Brown girls face are at the intersection of race, gender, and sometimes class, sexual orientation, disability, and other identities, are often unaccounted for in conversations about culturally-affirming SEL. A 2017 report produced by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality showed that adults perceive Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their White peers at almost all stages of childhood, starting at age 5 and peaking from ages 10 to 14.²⁷ The authors coined this phenomenon as the *adulthood* of Black girls. The adulthood of Black girls has pervasive effects that not only lead to harsh and zero-tolerance discipline policies, but implicit bias in classroom settings, a lack of culturally relevant curriculum, and inadequate

trauma-informed response and practices. This adulthood has historical roots that are ingrained in school structures, systems, and our society.

Many schools fail to intervene when there are instances of sexual harassment and bullying, which contributes to Black girls’ feelings of insecurity in the lack of safety at school. In a report conducted by our partner Girls for Gender Equity, one of the significant findings was that Black and Brown girls and transgender non-conforming (TGNC) youth experience interpersonal violence at school. Nearly one in four (23 percent) participants said they had personally been victims of sexual harassment at school. One of the participants described, *“I didn’t report it though because I didn’t want to make a fuss over it.”* Sexual harassment in schools impacts Black and Brown girls in distinct and violent ways.

Partners like the [National Black Women’s Justice Institute](#) counter this violence and the deficit language that often frames Black girls’ experiences in policy, research, and classroom discourse. NBWJI shared, “While the field of advocates now discussing the unique conditions of girls impacted by school-based criminalization has expanded, along with the scholarship on interventions, there is still a dearth of empirical data to support the development and expansion of culturally competent, gender-based interventions. This has a negative impact on policy-related demands that call for a more robust continuum of alternatives to suspension and expulsion. Our goal is to generate more data- and evidence-based information for advocates in the field in 2020, such that they can cite these models in advocacy and practice.”

From a webinar we hosted on [Creating Safe and Supportive Schools for Black and Brown Girls](#), we heard from our partners five ways that schools can support Black and Brown girls: **1) Listening** – We must incorporate student voice into school proceedings, including policy development, policy enforcement, and anti-bias/racial sensitivity training for staff members. We must examine our own biases to center listening during our practice before acting based on assumptions. Michelle Grier from Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) shared that their training focus on asking students what they need;

2) Supports – Black and Brown girls and TGNC youth want and need trained mental health professionals & social workers in their schools. They want extensive and careful screening of teachers and staff. They want counselors and social workers to have manageable caseloads so that they can see and support every student. In 2019, GGE fought (and WON!) the New York City Council to fund more Title IX coordinators as part of their [#SchoolGirlsDeserve](#) campaign; **3) Celebration** – Young people should not be punished for their ways of being and doing – the ways they show up and how they express themselves. We must re-examine and dismantle policies and practices rooted in anti-Blackness, sexism, homophobia, and other mechanisms of oppression (e.g. dress code policies); **4) Healing** – Without healing and safety, schools are not in the necessary condition for Black and Brown girls and transgender nonconforming youth of color to learn; and **5) Safety** – Logan Meza from SOUL Sisters called for the demilitarization of schools and for holding staff accountable as key tactics of providing real safety.

“Schools have to be places where we don’t just survive, but thrive. To survive is to not live at all.”

Data shows that students of color are disproportionately overrepresented among children with (dis)abilities.²⁸ Black students are twice as likely to be identified as having emotional disturbance.²⁹ Black and Brown youth are often mislabeled. Schools often label Black children as having Oppositional Defiant Disorder because they’re defying a system that wasn’t built to support them. Students with (dis)abilities are twice as likely as their peers to receive at least one out-of-school suspension.³⁰ Labels have long and lasting impacts. Anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and ableism are all intertwined.

Co-founder of [Racial Justice NOW!](#), Zakiya Sankara-Jabar, described in an [essay for Rethinking Schools](#) how her son was pushed out of his preschool for exhibiting developmentally-appropriate behaviors. He needed to move around while learning as a kinesthetic learner. Through Racial Justice NOW!’s

organizing in Dayton, Ohio, they presented the school district with the data that the district reported to the state to reveal that Dayton's out-of-school suspension rate was four times the state average. Further, Black boys with disabilities were the most suspended and expelled in the school district. RJN! didn't stop there. They were successful in their campaign to get the district to hire restorative justice coordinators for ten schools, lobbied to create an Office for Males of Color, and developed discipline report cards for 1,100 school districts across Ohio.

SEL can be a more appropriate container for safety, but it has to be a safe practice for all young people to thrive. SEL must be examined and implemented from an intersectional lens because young people have multiple identities that influence and shape their interactions with the world.

SEL uses transformative justice.

Organizers show us that schools can be sites for transformative justice, rather than punitive justice.

[Restorative/transformative justice](#) creates a proactive opportunity for community-building, rather than a reactive, punitive space. Schools can and should be built with a trust-building approach instead of school hardening, where school administrators/teachers actively listen to students, parents, and communities to co-construct a positive environment. Rooted in indigenous and African practices of community-building and circle keeping, many of our partners show how justice can be used to not only repair harm, but allow young people and adults to make mistakes and learn from them. SEL shouldn't be about reforming young people or communicating that they can only behave or act in certain ways to be accepted. Instead, SEL is about leaning into the fullness of humanity, to see our mistakes as lessons, and to know that communities support one another. This process cannot happen without relationship-building.

Through the [Urban Leaders Academy \(ULA\)](#), Girls for Gender Equity in New York City, New York served 150 students in three Brooklyn middle and high schools. Their interactive programming includes academic support, arts, and training in restorative justice and gender-based violence prevention through a social justice lens. In this work, GGE uses strategies such as circle keeping and arts-based activities with prompts such as: ***“Draw your dream school.”*** Even in the virtual space, they have adapted some of their practices to be successful over video calls. For an example of adapting circle keeping, they use a shared document with everyone's names around a circle so each person knows who to “pass” the talking piece to. After one person is finished talking, they place their talking piece on the video camera and the other person pulls their talking piece into them to begin their share. GGE trained over 75 teachers, 7 Assistant Principals, 7 Principals, parent coordinators, deans, and counselors to institutionalize a shift in school culture around restorative justice, healthy sexuality and consent and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Teachers Unite in New York City, New York hosts cohorts of educators and young people to organize to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. They have created a space for members to convene young people, who lead restorative practices, something their members say is indescribably educational for youth. Teachers Unite shared, “We are immensely proud of the impact our work has had on developing a new generation of youth embracing restorative justice, and we want to ensure they can use their skills and experience to serve public schools after they graduate. This means continuing to fight for permanent positions in schools that the alum can move into.”

In Kentucky, [Citizens of Louisville and United Together \(CLOUT\)](#) has successfully organized for and won [district-wide implementation of restorative practices](#) in Kentucky's Jefferson County Public Schools. Restorative practices not only help to repair harm, but done proactively, they are an essential tool for relationship and community-building. In Chicago, [COFI-Power PAC II](#) and [Voices of Youth in Chicago Education \(VOYCE\)](#) organized to replace Chicago Public Schools' ‘zero tolerance’ policy with



Toronto organizers and CJSF partners discuss police-free schools at the Toronto Police-Free Schools Learning Exchange in Toronto, ON, Canada.

a Student Code of Conduct rooted in Restorative Justice. COFI-Power PAC II also successfully championed the: **1)** elimination of suspension for children under 3rd grade, **2)** elimination of expulsion for students under 6th grade, and **3)** banning of group punishments – like silent lunch. VOYCE successfully advocated for the state to create a [Rethinking Safety](#) grants program that will expand resources for mental and behavioral health, restorative justice, and other trauma-informed supports for youth. This was part of VOYCE's larger effort to end the reliance on policing and harsh discipline practices in schools. Organizers have long been advocating for and implementing young people-led transformative justice training because they know that communities are stronger and better equipped when we can equalize power in relationships.

[Dignity in Schools Campaign](#), a national coalition of organizations that challenge school pushout, is currently developing a framework for restorative and transformative justice with their membership of over 100 organizations in 27 states. Their framework includes some key themes regarding restorative

and transformative justice practices: they should not be employed solely to address harm, but rather also used as a proactive approach to build relationships in a community; no one owns restorative or transformative justice and practices should not be co-opted or used in a punitive way, especially by those who are not connected to the Black and Indigenous roots of the practices; restorative justice must be culturally competent and honor the communities in which the practice come from; and the practices, in an oppressive system, require an openness to being creative and adaptive and share lessons learned. Transformative justice means that there cannot be a restoration of standard practices that reinforce the status quo, but rather shift the structures and systems that have led to harm in the first place. Because a critical component of SEL is conflict resolution, we must move towards practices and ways of being with one another that promote forgiveness, empathy, examining root causes, and dialogue, rather than punishment. Restorative practices give young people and adults the opportunity to practice effective communication and build deeper ties to the community.

States and districts **must connect** social emotional learning laws, policies, and grants programs **to culturally affirming** school climate and safety laws and policies.

There is ample evidence of how unnecessary and harmful policies stand in the way of the needs, demands, and vision laid out by CJSF's partners and the education justice movement. The possibilities associated with holistically embedding culturally affirming social-emotional learning in schools are hampered by many harmful policies that focus upon exclusion and harm. Nineteen states in this nation still actively permit the use of corporal punishment. Dress codes are weaponized against Black and Brown children by unnecessarily and harmfully excluding them from learning. Behavioral threat assessment teams required by state laws codify harmful and unnecessary connections between law enforcement agencies and schools that lead to profiling and the unnecessary criminalization of the act of childhood - even as all evidence points to consistent reductions in incidents of crime over the last several decades. School discipline policies grounded in the language of control continue to disproportionately exclude Black and Brown students, including those who are LGBTQ+, immigrant, and/or students with (dis)abilities. Trauma-informed initiatives often situate the community as guilty parties in their own trauma rather than acknowledging the deep seated historical and contemporary divestment that leads to trauma. Systemic efforts to incorporate culturally affirming social-emotional learning will not succeed if we do not work collectively to dismantle these obstacles completely rather than removing them a few bricks at a time while simultaneously fighting new obstacles that add to the wall rather than open the door.

In February 2020, we traveled to Juneau and Nome, Alaska to build with the Association of Alaska School Boards and learn about their cultural safety model and other ways in which they are supporting local school boards and communities across their state. In particular, AASB is working with school districts to prioritize: language restoration, place-based curriculum, community dialogues to rebuild trust with schools, and providing encouragement, resources, and support for more Alaska Native people to become teachers. Cultural safety, in many communities, looks and feels like being able to learn and sustain the indigenous languages and practices of the community, wearing traditional wear for graduation, intentionality around racial equity in equity frameworks, and climate justice. Their [work on cultural safety](#) flips the script on what school safety means in most of the "lower 48." By grounding their policy work in a deeply relational approach, AASB and their partners were not only able to make 29 changes in 48 different state policies related to culturally responsive social-emotional learning, they were also able to successfully advance new laws such as [Alaska HB 24](#). This law allows for limited teacher certificates for folks in the community to be able to teach Native Alaskan history because one of the stated education priorities is preserving language and culture through teaching Native Alaskan history. During our visit to Alaska many of the young people we spoke with shared that they did not learn any Native Alaskan history or language at their schools. They also noted that many of their teachers come from the Lower 48 and then leave after a year or two. Alaska HB 24 is an important next step towards acknowledging local experts and engaging them directly as educators in Alaska's schools.

Organizing is **SEL**

As evidenced throughout the Radport, organizing is SEL. It's the moments of relationship-building and trust-building that are necessary to build a base, create strong communities that are centered in love and respect, and holding space to heal from individual and collective trauma. It's knowing our emotions and being able to name them without ridicule to understand the fullness of the human

experience. It's taking cues from young people, learning about their talents, strengths, and communities, and ensuring that their experiences are reflected and centered in the curriculum. It's political education that develops social awareness so that history does not repeat itself. It's campaign building and direct action in service of a world that does not yet exist -- one that's rooted in equity, justice, joy, and love. It's restorative and transformative justice that creates a container for relationship-building so that learning can occur. It's communal care and an illustration of the Zulu word Ubuntu, which means "I am because we are."

When asked how SEL shows up in their work on a survey collected at the beginning of the Community of Practice, our partners replied:

"We have generated a curriculum to teach Black and Brown youth their organizing history and legacy, the school to prison pipeline, and a tool to help them develop a shared analysis around police in schools. We seek to engage them as history makers and to see their organizing in this moment as a part of making history."

"Everything we do is relevant to that: building power, development of youth, how people see themselves."

"As an organization we are significantly culturally affirming, work is race driven and connected to culture. We pour libations, open and close meetings with 7 harambes, and use colors of liberation--red, black and green. Serve and advocate Black folks' culture."

"It connects to how we build upon the wins of black communities. Educating the Asian and South Asian community that the immigration work, fighting border closings and the camps connects to the prison industry; it is what allows detention centers to exist."

karen "kg" marshall, Executive Director of [ReThink](#) shared,

"Our vision of liberatory education is... we don't have police in school at all, we don't use punitive measures to punish anybody, we don't think of anything as punishment, we know how to address harm in our community and more than that, there's space for young people to actually grow, be curious, to understand and make meaning about what's happening in the world and not only make meaning, but to also learn how to change things on a structural level... how to actually transform. That's our vision for liberatory education and that's always been."

**What world do you
want to dream into
being?**

Sustaining Change (Calls to Action)

1. Follow + support organizers' lead and demands

To create holistically safe schools, we must build authentic and reciprocal relationships with community. Educators, administrators, funders, and policymakers must look to communities to learn and to strategize. What sustains young people's social and emotional skill development after they have left the school building is community. Our partners already have several campaigns, programs, and trainings that directly relate to social and emotional skill-building. Our partners identified culturally-affirming SEL as central to many of their campaigns including:

- Ending the school to prison pipeline and criminalization of youth;
- police-free schools;
- anti-bias and anti-racist teacher training;
- funding for schools;
- expanding health and mental health clinics;
- community schools;
- keeping girls of color in school so they can be nurtured;
- providing a culturally affirming environment;
- culturally-affirming curricula; and
- relationship centered schools.

Through this work, organizers have already shown us what is possible -- school systems rooted in love and connectedness, rather than security and control. If we want SEL to live up to its promise, we must develop community partnerships to build networks of support for young people, educators, and community organizers. We must pass laws and write policies and procedures that originate from the grassroots rather than being top-down.

2. Fund organizing

Understand how well-intentioned solutions are still steeped in the myth of racial hierarchy. Distance learning, SEL, data collection, and monitoring all typically have well-intentioned origins and then end up as ways to police and surveil and oppress Black children and their families. Too often, philanthropy resources those well-intentioned solutions. Be aware and monitor the solutions you are resourcing to ensure against the entry of the myth of white supremacy.

Similarly, the school-to-prison pipeline is a spawn of white supremacy, and capitalism. It is insidious, and it will adapt. For instance, see the story of #Grace, imprisoned at 15 during a global pandemic for not doing her schoolwork at home and New Orleans charter schools forcing children to wear uniforms during virtual learning and requiring students to purchase those uniforms from the same vendors. Philanthropy must prepare for how the school-to-prison-pipeline will morph and account for that in grants to organizers and system actors. Grants that are directive from philanthropy often do not allow for the flexibility that organizers and communities need to shift tactics as the school-to-prison pipeline does.

Resource community. Trust that community leaders are aware of what they need and are ready to lead into a new and better future. Give resources and trust them to do their work, much as systems actors are resourced and then trusted to do their work. Give real resources to the grassroots with few (or no) barriers to those resources. Take the time to get to know organizing, to truly understand it so that you can not only resource it, but understand how it can help inform the other work that you support, including for instance support for SEL practices in schools.

Support connectivity. Collaboration between organizers and policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and others can bring about tremendous impacts.

3. Eliminate policies that perpetuate the myth of racial hierarchy and develop policies grounded in belonging and brilliance.

Examine and dismantle policies rooted in anti-Blackness, sexism, homophobia, and other mechanisms of oppression. Develop laws and policies that celebrate and uplift culture, are grounded in transformative justice and empathy, and create schools' conditions to support students, families, and educators in developing and utilizing critical consciousness.

Do not write policy in siloes or only engage students, families, and educators once a policy is drafted. Take the lead from organizations like National Women's Law Center, whose report [*DRESS CODED: Black girls, bodies, and bias in D.C. Schools*](#), authored by Black girls who attend D.C. Public Schools, is a model for equitable and culturally sustaining policy development.

Review the [Model Code](#) developed, added to, and continually revised by the Dignity in Schools Campaign – including the sections on necessary reframes to threat assessments and other harmful framing that criminalizes Black and Brown young folks. Steep in the historically grounded, yet contemporary recommendations in [We Came to Learn](#) – authored by the Alliance for Educational Justice and [Advancement Project](#) and their partners and members.

4. Assess how SEL as policing may show up in your work.

This Radport illustrates the pervasive ways that SEL is used as a means of emotional, psychological, and intellectual policing and control. Examine and interrogate how SEL frameworks have been weaponized against Black and Brown young people in schools. Identify if there are ways that SEL might be used in your classroom, school, or workplace with punitive and disciplinary measures attached. We pose critical questions: How does policing (e.g., emotional, psychological, or physical) show up in your work? Where does control and management show up in your work? Why does it show up? What commitments will you make to understand your emotions so you can thoughtfully show up for young people? What are you committed to unlearning to better recognize how white supremacy, anti-Blackness, heteropatriarchy, and ableism play a role in how you interact with others?

Encourage young people, peers, and colleagues to express and be vocal about the full range of their emotions. Don't criminalize some emotions over others. Provide culturally-affirming tools and supports for others to notice, observe, and understand their emotions without penalizing them for those emotions. Ask young people for their opinions and feedback and be prepared to make adjustments or changes. For example, [Californians for Justice offers a model to move from solely consulting young people to shaping real solutions](#). By garnering young people's opinions and centering them in the decision-making process, we all develop SEL skills, build mutual respect, and learn to see the power of new perspectives.

Educators must teach from a place of humility, and we must all regard ourselves as lifelong learners alongside young people. The [Abolitionist Teaching Network](#) offers helpful questions to build relationships with young people, such as: [How can your school be a place where you feel seen, valued, and excited to learn? How can I support you mentally, emotionally, and in your community?](#) When we lead with relationship-building, it provides a foundation of self-knowledge, social awareness, and allows us to be co-conspirators in the fight for freedom and justice.

5. Center culturally-affirming SEL practices in classrooms, schools, communities, policy, and philanthropy.

This work is not a checklist, but rather an on-going commitment to relationship-building and dismantling the oppressive forces that lead to injustice. This work requires critical, intentional, and on-going self and collective reflection, but it also requires sustained action. It is not one training or one reading group. To dream the world we all deserve into being requires a critical assessment of the current ways schools and SEL operate, a commitment to deep relationship-building, and releasing power to truly center community and organizer expertise. Assess school climate using [Village of Wisdom](#) and [Discriminology's Culturally-Affirming School Climate Survey](#). This tool highlights opportunities to mitigate racism and bias in schools and communities by assessing six constructs: *awareness of student interests, teacher expectations, racial identity and discrimination, multicultural navigation, selective vulnerability, and promotion of social justice*. The first step to creating change is understanding improvement areas, specifically how school practices, policies, and spaces can uphold inequitable power structures.

Learn and teach about the brilliance and resistance of Black and Brown communities. Create spaces that center the ideas, perspectives and ways of knowing and being of Black and Brown people. The [Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard](#)³¹ provides a tangible tool for parents, educators, young people, and community members to analyze their schools' English Language Arts curricula for cultural responsiveness. In addition to recognizing where curriculum may fall short, also reflect how even with culturally affirming curriculum, lack of thoughtful pedagogy and lack of relationship-building can lead to young people feeling tokenized, shamed, or misunderstood.

Create structures and systems of support such as transformative justice, circle keeping practices that honor the communities from which they originate, and opportunities for [Listening Partnerships and laugh and play](#). There should always be space for creation, innovation, and joy where young people can dance, sing, craft comical videos, rap, and be free in their bodies as revolutionary and radical acts. To build new and imaginative worlds, there must be time for dreaming -- freedom dreaming.

The work is far from over and we cannot wait. SEL has become another tactic to further criminalize, punish, and police Black and Brown students and harden schools. We know from our partners that young people, families, educators, school staff, and communities feel most safe in school when they have deep relationships. We also know if SEL work isn't culturally-affirming, it's not SEL. If we want to lean into the true promise of SEL -- to know ourselves, to know others, to know our histories, our joys, our pains, our spirituality, our land -- we must ensure that schools, especially schools as they exist in the virtual space, are built on relationships, equity, justice, and community. SEL can be a tool of decolonization and a path toward freedom and liberation, when done with intentionality and love. We must all work to ensure community voice is centered in schools, and elevate the power of organizing to create long-term systemic and structural change.

Join us.



Jabari Mickles, Dream Defenders - FL and Letha Muhammad, Education Justice Alliance - NC visit mural at CADRE by Mictlan Murals

Appendix

Community of Practice Curated Resource List

Podcasts

- [SchoolHouse: It's \(Not\) Academic! social-emotional learning](#)
- [SchoolHouse: Restorative Justice in Schools](#)
- [SchoolHouse: School Nurses: A Remedy to Education Inequity](#)
- [SchoolHouse: Leading While Following: A Social Justice Teachers' Guide](#)
- [SchoolHouse: Educating with Love, On Principle](#)

Articles

- [When SEL is Used as Another Form of Policing](#)
- ['Flood of Money' to BLM is a Racist Deception](#)

Webinars

SEL Webinar Series

The CJSF SEL webinar series opened a national dialogue about what culturally-affirming SEL looks like and feels like in schools--placing organizers, families, communities, and youth as the experts in conversation with researchers, policymakers, and educators who are invested in SEL supports. These conversations aimed to help shift harmful narratives about safety by engaging participants in virtual and collective deep-learning about culturally-affirming SEL and more holistically defined safety. Topics included: healing-centered engagement with students; turning SEL theory into practice; Black Lives Matter at school; and more. These conversations emphasized the importance of deep relationship-building and what safety looks like for all students, including emotional, mental, and psychological safety.

Webinar 1: What is Culturally-Affirming SEL?

This webinar was the first in CJSF's SEL Webinar Series. It situated culturally-affirming SEL alongside more holistic definitions of safety. Participants joined the CJSF team and our community partners Carlos Rojas (Youth on Board) and Najla Gomez Rodriguez (Californians for Justice) for a conversation on what culturally-affirming SEL looks and feels like in their work. Panelists highlighted that we must ensure SEL is not co-opted, but rather centered in community voice and demands.

[Watch the Recording](#) | [Resource Guide](#)

Webinar 2: When Black Lives Matter at School: Educators & Organizers Building Relationships in Schools

Building on the momentum of the national [Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action](#), this discussion centered the need for school curriculum, pedagogy, policies, and supports that examine structural racism, and highlight intersectional Black identities, Black history, and anti-racism.

This panel sparked dialogue and action towards intergenerational efforts to dismantle structural and systemic racism in schools and communities. Together, the panelists posed a dream and vision for what safe, loving, and affirming schools look like for Black and Brown students and communities. This conversation focused on learning centered in the [13 Guiding Principles of Black Lives Matter](#) and more.

[Watch the Recording](#) | [Resource Guide](#)

Webinar 3: Turning Theory into Practice: SEL Beyond the Checklist

While there are over 200 types of classroom-based SEL programs and frameworks used in schools across the country, these programs often relegate SEL to being an add-on to an already crammed curriculum. What we know is that true SEL -- SEL that's culturally-affirming -- is centered in deep relationships, which cannot be achieved by running through a checklist. This webinar highlighted educators and organizers who create relationship-centered spaces with young people and explored the questions: What does SEL look like inside and outside of the classroom when it's done well (i.e. centered in culture and uplifts the ways of being and knowing of Black and Brown communities)? What are the best practices of implementing and sustaining SEL when white supremacy is so entrenched in society? What does and can SEL look like beyond the checklist? Panelists shared culturally-affirming activities and lessons to model their practices and provided examples to use in classrooms and communities during and beyond this moment.

[Watch the Recording](#) | [Resource Guide](#)

In-person & Virtual Learning Exchanges/Site Visits

Minnesota Learning Exchange

This learning exchange explored how current school safety and security policy trends that utilize biometric data, risk assessments, data-sharing agreements, predictive analytics that further criminalize students and families of color; lifted up promising organizing tactics that have the potential to counter the harmful effects of criminalizing policies and programs; and envisioned liberatory, human-centered, and community driven data use in our schools. We learned from [Twin Cities Innovation Alliance](#) and the [Coalition to Stop the Cradle-to-Prison Algorithm](#) about their victory to dissolve the problematic data-sharing Joint Powers Agreement in the Twin Cities, Minnesota. On the second day of the learning exchange, CJSF partners explored culturally-affirming SEL definitions to refute harmful definitions that police Black and Brown young people. Partners discussed tools like [Village of Wisdom and Discriminology's Culturally-affirming School Climate Survey](#) and the [Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard](#). This was the first meeting of the Community of Practice.

[Resource Guide](#)

Californians for Justice Long Beach California Site Visit

25+ partner groups convened in Long Beach, California to learn about [Californians for Justice's Relationship-Centered Schools model](#). The model focuses on 1) investing in staff 2) valuing student voice and 3) creating space for relationship-building. On the first day, partners discussed topics like strategizing around creating conditions for systems accountability for being racially and culturally responsive and engaging key stakeholders (like educators/unions) in relationship-building work. We engaged in deep conversation about anti-Blackness in the movement, as well as strategies to dismantle it. On the second day, we conducted a site visit to Lakewood High School, where we heard from students, administrators, and teachers about how CFJ's work helped them to incorporate professional development where educators and administrators learn directly from students. At the end of the two days, partners came up with a collective definition for culturally-affirming SEL, which problematizes and extends the CASEL definition to center organizer and community demands.

[Resource Guide](#)

Association of Alaska School Boards Site Visit

We traveled to Juneau and Nome, Alaska to build with the Association of Alaska School Boards and learn about their cultural safety model. AASB is working with school districts to prioritize language restoration, place-based curriculum, community dialogues to rebuild trust with schools, and providing encouragement, resources, and support for more Alaska Native people to become teachers. Cultural safety, in many communities, looks and feels like being able to learn and sustain the indigenous languages and practices of the community, wearing traditional wear for graduation, intentionality around racial equity in equity frameworks, and climate justice.

[Cultural Safety in Education](#) | [Transforming Schools: a Framework for Trauma-informed Practice in Alaska](#)

ListeningWorks

We traveled to Massachusetts to learn from [Youth on Board's ListeningWorks](#), a national healing project aimed at strengthening organizational and movement culture through SEL. We learned about how listening partnerships can be used as a tool for wholehearted listening to encourage comfortable space for a partner to say whatever is on their mind without offering feedback or advice -- a strategy for deep relationship-building. As much of SEL is focused on relationship-building, ListeningWorks offers a powerful model for how to not only build deep relationships, but sustain them through authentic listening, radical vulnerability, and love. It is a tangible model and strategy for adults (and young people) to practice SEL for themselves and sustain a level of self and communal care.

SEL in Action Convening

Amanda Gallegos ([Southwest Organizing Project](#)) and Andrea Colon ([Rockaway Youth Taskforce](#)) facilitated a conversation at the fall 2019 SEL in Action convening about centering food, water, and land justice in culturally-affirming SEL practices, policies, and curricula. Amanda and Andrea created collective definition for the terms: community organizing, food justice, food desert/food apartheid, and land sovereignty. In addition, they each talked about the similarities and the differences in their work, as they both fight for access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food for their communities, while also navigating and fighting for education justice, climate justice, and environmental justice. Many thanks to [Education First](#) and [NoVo Foundation](#) for their invitation and thought partnership.

[Presentation Slides](#)

Turning Theory into Practice: SEL Beyond the Checklist Virtual Learning Exchange

This learning exchange explored what SEL looks like in the classroom when it's done well, with particular consideration around how educators and organizers are shifting SEL practices to virtual learning when communities are classrooms. Together, we engaged in interactive learning around what SEL looks like in practice, as well as unpacked how we push for culturally-affirming SEL when white supremacy is so entrenched in society. We were in conversation with social justice educators and SEL specialists to hear about initiatives in school districts aimed at social-emotional development, the evolution of those initiatives, and the challenges and glimmers of SEL.

[Resource Guide](#)

A Path Forward: Lifting Up Holistic Safety & Dismantling Anti-Blackness in this Moment & Beyond Virtual Learning Exchange

With many back-to-school plans already set in motion without the input of young folks, parents, and educators, SEL and safety are being centered from a white-washed, anti-Black, capitalist, patriarchal framework. However, organizers across the country have been fighting for #PoliceFreeSchools and winning! Fighting against police in schools is fighting what is inherently anti-Black. We must continue to make sure that young folks aren't being emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually policed under the guise of social-emotional learning.

This learning exchange explored a path forward as #PoliceFreeSchools becomes a powerful reality. Together with our partners we co-created a space for reflection around anti-Blackness in the movement, in SEL practices and policies, and school safety work. We examined questions such as: How do we ensure that healing and emotional justice are centered in back-to-school plans? What supports are needed to dismantle anti-Blackness in structures and systems, as well as at the interpersonal and individual level? What does a path forward look like for school safety work?

[Resource Guide](#)

Education Dreaming “in the Cloud”: Social-Emotional Learning #CommunitiesAreClassrooms [Twitter Chat](#)

As schools shifted to emergency remote learning in the midst of COVID-19 -- caregivers homeschooled, young people logged into online systems, and educators shifted their content to digital platforms -- all while trying to be well amidst the uncertainty. COVID-19 shined a light on all of the cracks in how systems have failed us at the intersections of justice. How do we lift up new dreaming about education? How do we shift narratives about what places and spaces constitute schooling? How do we lean into the deep relationship-building that is necessary for safe and supportive schooling (when communities are classrooms), as we navigate social distancing? What does (culturally-affirming) SEL look like beyond the classroom? This Twitter chat was a virtual connectivity space to explore and share resources, uplift dreaming about the future of education, social-emotional learning, and holistic safety.

Endnotes

¹ Education Week Research Center original analysis of Civil Rights Data Collection, 2017

² <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

³ For more on the history of policing, visit Zinn Education Project's [Teach the History of Policing](#) and Dream Defender's [Sundday School](#).

⁴ Black Organizing Project's People's Plan. <http://blackorganizingproject.org/bops-peoples-plan/>

⁵ Coyne, C. (2020, Sept 18). Gwinnett students call for racial equity in schools. <https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/gwinnett-students-call-for-racial-equity-in-schools/KS26VW7CNBFEROPGA2ST2RCSLM/>

⁶ For a detailed look at each of the learning exchanges, site visits, webinars, and other convenings, please see the “Community of Practice Curated Resources” section in the appendix of the radport.

⁷ Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, K.B. (2011). “The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions.” Child Development, 82, pp.405-432.

⁸ Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Gulley, S., & Higgins-D’Alessandro, A. (2013). “A review of school climate research.” Review of Educational Research, 83(3), pp.357-385.

⁹ See: <https://edtrust.org/resource/school-counselors-matter/>

¹⁰ Vogel, S., & Schwabe, L. (2016). Learning and memory under stress: implications for the classroom. npj Science of Learning, 1(1), 1-10.

¹¹ Necropolitics is the use of social and political power to dictate how some people may live and how some must die. Achille Mbembe, author of On the Postcolony, was the first scholar to explore the term in depth in his article of the same name.

¹² See: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/four-girls-n-y-middle-school-subjected-dehumanizing-strip-search-n1000321>

¹³ Morris, M. W. (2019). Sing a rhythm, dance a blues: Education for the Liberation of Black and Brown Girls. The New Press.

¹⁴ Howard Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences challenges the notion that there is only one type of intelligence. The theory broadens the concept of knowledge to also include musical, naturalist, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, intra-personal, and interpersonal, while society often values linguistic and logical-mathematical knowledge.

¹⁵ Hollie, S. (2017). Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and learning: Classroom practices for student success. Teacher Created Materials.

¹⁶ Southern Kindred Collective. <http://www.healingcollectivetrauma.com>

¹⁷ Fanon, F. (1961). Wretched of the earth, 2004. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove.

¹⁸ Defined as “a system that prioritizes, privileges, and centralizes the feelings of white men no matter the cost or consequence.” Emotional justice is a framework created by Esther Armah. For more information see: <https://www.theaiej.com/emotional-justice>

¹⁹ Kelley, R. D. (2002). Freedom dreams: The black radical imagination. Beacon Press.

²⁰ King, L. J. (2017). The status of Black history in US schools and society. Social Education, 81(1), 14-18.

²¹ Simmons, D. (2019). Why we can’t afford whitewashed social-emotional learning. ASCD. http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education_update/apr19/vol61/num04/Why_We_Can’t_Afford_Whitewashed_Social-Emotional_Learning.aspx

²² Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom, 6(3), ix-xi.

²³ Evans-Winters, V. E., & with Girls for Gender Equity. (2017). Flipping the script: The dangerous bodies of girls of color. Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies, 17(5), 415-423.

²⁴ Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to describe the inequality that individuals experience at the intersections between their multiple, interlocking, oppressed identities related to systems and structures of discrimination.

²⁵ Walls, N. E., Kane, S. B., & Wisneski, H. (2010). Gay—straight alliances and school experiences of sexual minority youth. Youth & Society, 41(3), 307-332.

²⁶ Californians for Justice. Why Relationship Centered Schools Matter for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer/Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students.

²⁷ Epstein, R., Blake, J., & González, T. (2017). Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls’ childhood. Center on Poverty and Inequality. <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/poverty-inequality/upload/girlhood-interrupted.pdf>

²⁸ United States Department of Education (2016). 38th annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep/2016/parts-b-c/38th-arc-for-idea.pdf>

²⁹ Harper, K. (2017, Jan 12). 5 things to know about racial and ethnic disparities in special education. Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/5-things-to-know-about-racial-and-ethnic-disparities-in-special-education>

³⁰ United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights. 2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

³¹ J. Bryan-Gooden, M. Hester, & L. Q. Peoples (2019). Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard. New York: Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University.



**DREAMS OF
HOLISTICALLY
SAFE SCHOOLS
ARE POSSIBLE.
ORGANIZERS
SHOW US THE WAY.**