

# CASE STUDY COMPILATION

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INTEGRATING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING  
(SEL) INTO ACADEMICS & BEYOND



transforming  
education

2020

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# About the Case Study Compilation

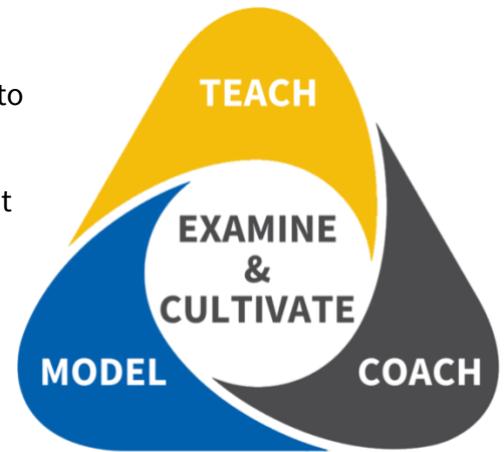
## INTENDED AUDIENCE

The Case Study Compilation can be used by any educator who works in a K-12 school setting, including teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, SEL Directors, teacher leaders, school principals, and others. It may also be useful to professional development coaches, trainers, instructional leaders, and nonprofit professionals who support the work of K-12 educators.

## PURPOSE

The Case Study Compilation was developed with and for educators to provide examples of practice related to three questions:

- What does it mean to focus on social-emotional development and the creation of positive learning environments?
- How can educators integrate their approaches to social, emotional, and academic development?
- What does it look, sound, and feel like when SEL is effectively embedded into all elements of the school day?



When read one at a time, the case studies offer snapshots of social-emotional learning in action; they describe daily routines, activities, and teachable moments within short vignettes. When read together, the case studies provide a unique picture of what it takes for a school to integrate social, emotional, and academic learning across grade levels, content areas, and other unique contexts.

This compilation should not be seen as comprehensive or directive; it is not a user manual for classroom practice. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to this work. The highlighted practices inevitably have room for improvement and provide only a single approach to a situation with many other alternative and valid approaches. Readers should approach the case studies as opportunities to read, reflect, challenge, and act.

## WHAT'S INCLUDED

- 1. Eleven case studies:** Each case study highlights educator ‘moves’ and strategies to embed social-emotional skills, mindsets, and competencies throughout the school day and within academics. Each case study concludes with a reflection prompt that challenges readers to examine their own practice. The case studies are written from several different perspectives, including teachers in the classroom and in distance learning environments, a school counselor, and district leaders.
- 2. Reflection Guide for Professional Learning:** The Reflection Guide offers an entry point for educators to think critically about their work with youth in order to strengthen their practice. School leaders or other partners may choose to use this Reflection Guide in a variety of contexts, including coaching conversations and staff professional development sessions.

# Reflection Guide for Professional Learning

The Reflection Guide for Professional Learning promotes reflection, collaboration, and learning and is intended to support readers' engagement with the Case Study Compilation.

## **Before reading any case studies, answer the following questions individually and/or as a team:**

1. How do you define SEL? Why does SEL matter to you? (If you are working with a team, spend time building common language and purpose.)
2. How do you currently promote SEL in your learning community?
3. What do you hope to gain from reading these case studies?
4. Review the Table of Contents. Which case studies are most applicable to your work? Which sound the most interesting? Which case studies will you plan to read, and in which order?

## **While you read each case study, consider highlighting or annotating moments, phrases, or actions that stand out to you. Answer the following questions individually and/or as a team:**

1. What do the subject(s) of the case study do, or not do, to promote SEL?
2. Of these strategies, which do you currently use in your work with students or staff?
3. Which strategies highlighted in this case study can you implement or adapt to your own practice?
4. How would you coach the subject(s) of the case study in their practice? What did they do well? What could they do better? Explain your thinking.

## **After reading one or more case studies, answer the following questions individually and/or as a team:**

1. Where do you see the five components of Transforming Education's SEL Integration Approach (Examine, Cultivate, Teach, Model, Coach) within the case studies?
2. What have you learned from reading the case studies? How might you share those learnings with your colleagues?
3. What are your next steps? Consider completing the chart below:

Which strategy/approach do you want to try?	When and how can you start implementing it?	How will you modify it to fit in your context?

## CASE STUDIES

# CONFERENCING WITH STUDENTS TO SUPPORT GOAL SETTING

*Ms. Hanafin uses conferences in reading/writing class to promote self-management, growth mindset, and goal setting.*

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**Grade level:** 4th grade

**Subject:** English Language Arts

**Topics:** Goal-setting, self-reflection, growth mindset, interpersonal skills, conferencing

*Many thanks to our partners, TeachPlus MA Policy Fellows, for submitting content for this & several other case studies.*

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The goal of Ms. Hanafin’s reading/writing lesson today is to teach students how to self-reflect on their work using a guiding [rubric](#) and then set their own goals for future work. Ms. Hanafin says to the class, “Learners, it is important for us to take time to practice self-reflection. Today I’m going to show you how you can self-reflect on your writing, and then set goals to grow and improve.”

Ms. Hanafin begins the lesson by sharing a sample of her own writing about the class’s [read-aloud book](#). Then, she introduces students to the rubric she is going to use to reflect on her work. She talks through how she would score herself on the rubric, why she would give herself that score, and the goal she’s going to set for herself in the future. “I’m thinking I am a Level 1 right now because the rubric says, ‘I describe the character traits of the main character and provide evidence.’ Now, in my writing, I clearly described how my character is feeling, but a feeling is not really the same as a trait. I could be more specific about my character’s traits and I still need to provide evidence. Even though I really want to rate myself higher, I know that I need to be honest in order to grow. To improve my score, I am going to set a new goal for myself to work on as we continue to read this book together. I will place it on the cover so that anytime I feel confused or unmotivated, I can refocus my energy on my goal.” Ms. Hanafin writes her goal on a sticky note and places it on the front of her book: “MY GOAL: Identify character traits with evidence.”

Ms. Hanafin then shows a writing sample from a former student and asks the class to work with their partners to score the sample using the rubric. As she walks around, Ms. Hanafin applauds one pair of students for exhibiting self-management by monitoring their time on task. She also calls the class’s attention to another pair’s demonstration of [growth mindset](#); they are not giving up on their progress and are asking for help when needed. She invites the pair to [model their thinking](#) with the class, saying, “I heard Dan and Addison having a really strong conversation that I want them to share. What I want you to notice is how they evaluate their own writing appropriately and effectively use their partnership to set a new goal moving forward. What did they do? How did they support one another in that process?” After Dan and Addison share their conversation with the class, the students engage in a large group discussion about the power of mindsets and peer support.

Then, Ms. Hanafin transitions the class by saying, “Learners, I am so proud of the hard work you have been doing to grow your brains. Yesterday, you wrote your own response to your reading, and today I want you to take some time to reflect on and evaluate your work. You’re now going to use a rubric to review your own writing just like I did earlier, and just like you did with the sample student work. When you’re done scoring yourself on the rubric, then you can set a goal for yourself on the sticky note I’ve provided. I’ll be coming around to conference with you on this, so let’s get to it!”

Ms. Hanafin floats around the room, conferencing with each student for a few minutes. Because she has built strong, trusting relationships with her students, Ms. Hanafin is able to give direct feedback to support students' learning. She says to one student, *"Wow, I love the way you dug right back into your book once you gave yourself a score on the rubric. That shows focus and responsibility. Can you tell me why you gave yourself a Level 3? Under Level 3, I notice it says that you should have two pieces of evidence to support your character trait. Can you show me where you have two?"* When the student realizes that they only provided one piece of evidence, Ms. Hanafin continues, *"Great reflection—it seems like you may need to add that to your goal. Next time I check in with you, I'll be looking for two pieces of evidence."*

Ms. Hanafin brings the students back together on the rug to review the day's lesson. She closes by saying, *"You should be very proud of the hard work you've done today, learners. Self-reflecting and setting goals are not easy activities, even for adults. In the coming days and weeks, I think you'll notice that we're going to regularly reflect on our work and set goals during our reading time. It's the best way to grow!"*

### **Reflection**

Consider Ms. Hanafin's approach to SEL integration in this case study and reflect on your own practice. How do you model a positive, growth-oriented mindset for students and help them set meaningful and relevant goals for learning?

# USING ROLES & ROUTINES TO FOSTER RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

*All students in Ms. Siarnacki's class are empowered to practice interpersonal skills during their daily interactions in book clubs with peers.*

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**Grade level:** 3rd grade

**Subject:** English Language Arts

**Topics:** Interpersonal skills, relationships, classroom routines, empowering students, book club, special education

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When it's time for book club to begin, Ms. Siarnacki prompts students to form their groups and check in with each other. The first five minutes of book club serve as a time to build relationships; students get to ask one another questions about their likes and dislikes, things that are going well that day, and things that could be going better.

Ms. Siarnacki then asks students to review their [book club roles](#). She knows that effective group functioning is important to students' academic success in book clubs, so she carefully structures the book clubs to meet the needs of all learners and assigns weekly 'jobs' with specific responsibilities. Many of Ms. Siarnacki's students have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), so this allows her to seamlessly embed their goals into the general curriculum. For example, a student working on developing academic vocabulary might benefit from the role of Vocabulary Detective, while a student working on comprehension strategies could develop their summarizing skills as the News Reporter. Throughout the year, she shares students' goals with them so that they can track progress together, and she carefully rotates the roles to help students expand their skills over time.

After assigning roles and reviewing the expectations for book club, Ms. Siarnacki says to her students, *"Today, we will start with a short story, so that we can practice our jobs during book club. As you read through the story and discuss with your group, pay close attention to how you are feeling and what your role in the group is. Does your assigned role feel too difficult? Are you being challenged enough? In what ways could your peers help you be a better group member?"* Students engage in their book clubs while Ms. Siarnacki walks around and provides support. Before class ends, students are invited to write their reflections about the lesson on an ['exit ticket'](#) or closing reflection activity. Ms. Siarnacki tells the class, *"I want to hear how today's book clubs went. Please reflect on your role and how everything went today, and in tomorrow's lesson we can troubleshoot some of our challenges as a whole group."*

The next day, Ms. Siarnacki asks the students to circle up at the front of the room. Then she selects some of the students' exit ticket concerns and shares them anonymously with the class. One reads: *"I am doing all the work in my book club group and it's not fair. My group mates are not finishing their parts quickly enough."* Ms. Siarnacki asks the class, *"Can we help our peer with this challenge? What words can we use to describe how this student might be feeling? On a sticky note, describe how this person might be feeling right now and explain why."* She points students to a poster in her classroom that lists emotion words and shares a sentence starter to support students with a prompt: *"I think this student feels \_\_\_ because \_\_\_"*.

After several students share their ideas with the whole group, Ms. Siarnacki then asks students to do a turn and talk and discuss the following prompt: *"What advice should we give to this student to help them*

*determine a next step?” The class discusses social perspective taking and the need for empathy in this situation, and they determine a way forward. One student summarizes the group’s decision, saying, “Maybe this person’s group members are struggling to understand the material. Instead of assuming that they don’t want to work or blaming them right away, I think they should find ways to help.”*

Day two of book clubs goes well. Before the end of class, Ms. Siarnacki pulls aside the student who wrote the comment that was shared anonymously earlier in the lesson. She tells him that she understands why he felt frustrated and that she hopes today’s discussion with the group helped him decide what to do next. She reminds him that she is there to help him practice if he needs support. He thanks his teacher and says, “Next time we meet in our book clubs, if I feel frustrated again at the slow pace, I will first check my work, then I will check in with my group mates and see if they need help.”

Ms. Siarnacki understands that learning to work with groups is a difficult but necessary skill. In the past, she would solve problems for students. But now, she uses authentic moments during her book clubs and other classroom activities to empower students to make responsible decisions for themselves.

### **Reflection**

Consider Ms. Siarnacki’s approach to SEL integration in this case study and reflect on your own practice. How do you use routines in your classroom to build relationships with and among students? What opportunities do students have to practice interpersonal skills with each other during class?

# COLLABORATING WITH STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND COLLEAGUES

*Ms. Eisenson partners with others to support an Emerging Bilingual student's development of self-efficacy and overall confidence.*

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**Grade level:** 8th grade

**Subject:** History

**Topics:** Self-efficacy, confidence, student voice, staff collaboration, family engagement, supporting Emerging Bilingual students

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Ms. Eisenson is a History teacher who is very intentional about creating a positive and inclusive classroom. She hangs up posters with resources for learning and motivation, and because she works with many Emerging Bilingual students in her mainstream history class, she frequently engages students in conversations about the [power of the bilingual brain](#). She wants to deeply understand her students' cultural wealth, so she engages in meaningful dialogue with families, attends events in and outside of school, and learns about her students' interests and strengths. She is among her students' favorite teachers at school because, as one of her students says, "*Ms. Eisenson listens to us, and even though she can sometimes be strict, we know that her rules come from a place of love.*"

About four months into the school year, one Emerging Bilingual student with whom Ms. Eisenson has a positive relationship starts to exhibit behaviors that are making Ms. Eisenson feel worried. The student arrives to class late, without her materials. During direct instruction, this student passes notes and talks with others, and when Ms. Eisenson introduces an upcoming group project to the class, the student slumps in her seat and rolls her eyes. Ms. Eisenson checks in with the other teachers to see if these actions are happening in their classes too, and they all report noticing the same new behaviors. Ms. Eisenson decides to check in with this student privately the next day.

The student is resistant to Ms. Eisenson's questions at first and shrugs off the concerns, saying, "*School is too boring, so I don't want to do the work.*" After a few more days of inquiry, however, the student stops by the classroom at the end of a school day and opens up to Ms. Eisenson. She says, "*This stuff is really hard, Ms. E. Last year, I was in a bilingual school where we learned in two languages, so I felt more supported. Now this stuff in English only is just too fast for me. So, I get mad. And I'm going to fail this new group project about oral history. I feel dumb... like I'm just never going to learn it right.*" This is not the first time Ms. Eisenson has experienced this type of conversation with a student, and she's had many moments in her teaching career in which students have reported a lack of confidence. Ms. Eisenson channels those experiences as she talks with the student to understand her concerns. She also normalizes this feeling, letting the student know that sometimes, even when students work hard and try their best, they will at times need additional supports. Ms. Eisenson ends the conversation by committing to helping the student grow in her self-efficacy related to the upcoming group project.

Ms. Eisenson calls the student's mother to better understand what's happening and to ask for family input. In that conversation, Ms. Eisenson learns that this student has recently shown great initiative and leadership; this summer, she advocated on behalf of her peers at a local summer camp and got the leaders to pay for a new dramatic arts program. She's also very involved in her church and has a strong peer network from her former bilingual school. The student is clearly a leader and needs to have those same

outlets and opportunities in her new school. The student’s mother and Ms. Eisenson agree that this student is talented and capable of greatness; they are concerned about the recent dip in confidence and agree to try some new approaches.

Together, they discuss what they can do to help this young person develop a greater sense of self-efficacy on specific assignments, more overall confidence in her ability to participate in classes in English, and greater awareness about her assets as a bilingual individual. They decide that at home, her mother will point out specific moments when the student shows her capacity for leadership, such as helping her little brother do homework, translating for her mother at the doctor’s office, or practicing her drama monologues aloud for the family. At school, Ms. Eisenson commits to using these same strategies and also reminding the student of all the ways she has already been successful in class this year. Ms. Eisenson will also share stories of former Emerging Bilingual students who have been successful on specific projects in her class, with the hopes of inspiring this student to know that success is achievable. Ms. Eisenson ends the call with her student’s mother and is excited to get back into the classroom the next day with this student.

While helping to bolster confidence is critical, Ms. Eisenson knows that she needs to meet her students halfway, too, especially if the assigned coursework is not yet accessible in English. As Ms. Eisenson continues to remind the student of past successes on group projects, and exposes the student to other inspiring stories of success. Ms. Eisenson also calls an informal meeting with the other teachers to strategize about making learning more accessible for all of their Emerging Bilingual students who might not feel fully supported in the classroom yet. After some [reading](#) and discussion, the teachers identify two strategies to implement this quarter—sentence stems and word walls— so that students have easy access to common vocabulary and can feel more confident when speaking or writing in their classes.

A few weeks later, Ms. Eisenson and the student check in to discuss how she is feeling about her classes. *“It’s still hard, Ms. E. I’m not going to lie. But having the word wall in my classes gives me the chance to use the words that I sometimes forget in English. That’s helped me participate in groups more easily. I’ve been stepping up in the oral history group project because I feel more supported. And whenever I feel my self-efficacy dipping on that project, I remind myself of the times I’ve been successful in similar tasks in the past. Thanks for that advice.”* After seeing this student’s progress, Ms. Eisenson connects with her principal to engage in more critical dialogues about how teachers can support Emerging Bilingual students throughout the school.

### Reflection

Consider Ms. Eisenson’s approach to SEL integration in this case study and reflect on your own practice. How can you provide proactive supports to Emerging Bilingual students and help them to develop greater self-efficacy in their classes?

# CENTERING STUDENT VOICE IN GRADING AND FEEDBACK

*Mr. Cormier uses several approaches to feedback in his math class as a way to promote students' self-reflection, goal setting, and ownership over learning.*

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**Grade level:** 7th grade

**Subject:** Math

**Topics:** Self-reflection, interpersonal skills, positive mindsets, standards-based grading

*Many thanks to our partners, TeachPlus MA Policy Fellows, for submitting content for this & several other case studies.*

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Mr. Cormier is a veteran teacher who has always felt uncertain about letter grades. He believes that letter grades force students to have a fixed mindset in their learning; students tend to think earning an A means “I’m smart”, while Cs, Ds, and Fs mean “I’m not smart.” Over the summer, he and a colleague read about [standards based grading](#) and decided they wanted to try out this approach in their classrooms.

To make their dream a reality, the two teachers begin by garnering support from colleagues and parents. They start with their grade level chair, who is hesitant at first but eventually approves a pilot program. Then, during the September Open House, Mr. Cormier and his colleague hold an information session with families to explain the benefits of standards-based grading and how this type of feedback can help families become more involved in their students’ learning.

To support students in this transition, Mr. Cormier works with his classes once per week on goal setting and monitoring. He uses the beginning of class each Friday to coach students on how to identify their specific strengths and areas of growth. Establishing this process takes several weeks, because Mr. Cormier first has to explicitly teach his students how to self-assess their learning; he models for them by reflecting on sample work and identifying strengths and areas for growth within the sample problems. Then he helps students translate that skill to more personal self-assessment.

After a few months, Mr. Cormier notices that many of his students have become accustomed to the new goal setting rhythms. They begin to internalize what he hoped they would: that mistakes are okay and that it’s worthwhile to self-reflect in order to learn and grow. However, other students continue to struggle with negative self-talk. Each time they reflect on their goals and realize they haven’t yet met those goals, students say things like, “Again! See, Mr. Cormier? I can’t do this stuff.” He realizes that many of his students are so used to the traditional style of grading that a few months of coaching on self-reflection and goal setting are not enough to rid them of deeply-held habits and mindsets. Mr. Cormier decides he wants to try another approach.

Mr. Cormier knows that [peer modeling](#) can be a powerful tool for increasing students’ self-efficacy, growth mindset, and interpersonal skills, so he decides to try it with his classes. With the help of his co-teacher, he designs a peer learning process that fits his students’ needs. He holds mini training sessions for students on how to give and receive constructive feedback. In these sessions, students role play about how to model self-reflection and goal setting using [positive and constructive language](#) for their peers.

After implementing a new peer modeling process for a few weeks, Mr. Cormier begins to notice that students who normally would not work together begin engaging in critical conversations together about their learning. Students who struggled with identifying personal strengths and areas for growth begin to do

so with less difficulty. Mr. Cormier finds that students become so invested in these new peer learning practices that they ask Mr. Cormier to make Fridays a student-led learning day. Mr. Cormier enthusiastically adopts this new practice. Every Friday, students pair up and collaborate on a Problem of the Day. Select pairs get up in front of the room to walk the class through their decisions and answers, mistakes and all.

When COVID-19 forces his school to close, Mr. Cormier's students ask if they can continue with their peer learning rhythms. Mr. Cormier speaks with the district's technology team to ensure students have the necessary resources, and then he engages students in a planning session about how to continue to engage in student-led learning in a virtual setting on Fridays. Every Friday, students submit their Problem of the Day work to one another for feedback.

Though his students are still building their ability to self-assess, a skill important for Mr. Cormier's ideal approach to standards-based grading, Mr. Cormier is pleased to see his students' ownership of their learning and is excited to try additional approaches in the future.

### **Reflection**

Consider Mr. Cormier's approach to SEL integration in this case study and reflect on your own practice. How can you reimagine existing policies and structures in the classroom to give students increased ownership over their learning?

# TEACHING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EQUALITY AND EQUITY

*Ms. Medor uses reflection and interactive activities to encourage students' development of social awareness and critical consciousness.*

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**Grade level:** 6<sup>th</sup> grade

**Subject:** Diversity, equity, and inclusion

**Topics:** Equity, equality, critical consciousness, social awareness, opening routines

*Many thanks to our partners, TeachPlus MA Policy Fellows, for submitting content for this & several other case studies.*

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To learn more about the activities referenced in this case study, explore these sample lessons: [Lesson 1](#) and [Lesson 2](#).

Ms. Medor is a 6th math teacher who is committed to practicing anti-racist and culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. She believes that staff should have access to professional development on these topics (see [here](#) and [here](#)) so that they can explicitly teach students about issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Her school supports these efforts, as well.

Today is a school-wide community day focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Ms. Medor has prepared a lesson for her students to think critically about equity in a way that is relevant to their lives. Though the nature of the lesson is new, the day starts as it always does, with greetings at the door of Ms. Medor's math classroom.

Ms. Medor knows that the first few minutes of class are incredibly important to help students focus on doing their best, so she consistently uses a predictable opening routine to foster a calm and safe environment. The physical space is ready to welcome students; materials are organized at the front table and a reminder of the class's 'First-Five' [warmup routine](#) is written on the board. As students enter the room, greetings are filled with compliments on hair styles, inquiries about the new oil scent dissipating from the diffuser, and certainty from some sports fans that the Celtics' winning streak will be sustained. One student, Marvin, gets a little extra movement by walking to the teacher's desk to set the timer; he reminds his peers that they have 5 minutes to complete their warmup task. Ms. Medor walks to the middle of the classroom and says, "I'm going to begin collecting homework. If it's not on your desk, I'll assume you are bringing it tomorrow for partial credit."

Ms. Medor begins her rounds as students silently complete their warmup activity. She visits the working space of every student, and each young person shares a different reflection with their teacher:

- Jasmiry reflects that she was proud of her perfect score on the quiz this week, and Ms. Medor confirms that she will call Jasmiry's mom today to tell her the good news.
- Javier writes that the highlight of his weekend was his mom's baby shower. Ms. Medor congratulates Javier and affirms that he will be a great big brother to his baby sister.
- Keyla reflects that she has been having trouble staying organized in her classes. Ms. Medor stars Keyla's name on her clipboard as a reminder to help her get organized during study hall.

When the timer goes off, Marvin uses another movement break to walk up and turn off the timer. He silently dances back to his seat and class officially begins.

Ms. Medor and her co-teacher, Mr. Gray, kick off the lesson by calling students' attention to the warmup activity they completed. In it, students were asked to brainstorm an imaginary injury that has affected their bodies. Some students pretend that they've got a broken arm, others have a cut from falling while running. "What's your pretend injury?" Ms. Medor inquires of individual students. The atmosphere is lighthearted, and both Ms. Medor and Mr. Gray verbally praise students for their ability to provide fun but appropriate

answers, as well as manage their laughter, so that the lesson can continue. While Ms. Medor continues to invite responses, Mr. Gray hands out a bandage to every student.

Ms. Medor poses the next question to the class. “How do you feel now that your injury has been addressed with this bandage?” She allows students to take control of the conversation, interjecting only when needed to model ways to invite others into the conversation. Students first discuss the idea of fairness, and how nice it was for Mr. Gray to provide all students with the same medical treatment. Then the conversation begins to pivot as some students realize their injuries will not be fixed by the small bandage and that some students may need different resources. Collectively, students agree that sometimes it is not enough to treat everyone the same, and they grapple with this idea and its relation to what they’ve been taught about fairness and equality. Mr. Gray defines the concepts of equality and equity, and students practice applying those definitions to the example from the warmup activity.

Ms. Medor explains that students should keep the learnings from their warmup activity in mind as they begin their lesson today. She points out that they used a fun example, and a physical one, to underscore the importance of equity, but now the class is going to pivot to talk about racial inequalities in the U.S. She shows students a video that addresses the systemic racial inequality that awards privileges to white members of society and oppresses Black and Brown members of society. Ms. Medor provides a few discussion prompts related to the video and students start the discussion by speaking with a partner first. Then, the class engages in a large group conversation. Mr. Gray praises several students for actively listening to each other and posing thoughtful questions such as, “Would you care to share more about that?” Throughout the conversation, students start to make connections to their own lives and their experiences inside and outside of school. As applicable, Ms. Medor provides students with some of the formal terminology for the descriptions of racialized experiences they may have faced, because she knows through her own journey as an educator that knowledge is powerful.

In the final portion of the lesson, students are asked to analyze three case studies of increasing difficulty. Ms. Medor reminds students to revisit the definitions of ‘equity’ and ‘equality’ from earlier in the lesson; she tells them that although some situations in the case studies might not seem ‘equal,’ they are in fact equitable. It is students’ job to identify the factors (e.g. actions, decisions, structures) within the case studies that help to promote equity. Mr. Gray reviews the instructions aloud: students should work together in small groups to tackle the task, the student in the group with the earliest birthday should speak first, and all groups should aim to complete the assignment within 15 minutes. Groups begin the assignment and the teachers walk around to provide clarification and encouragement. When she notices some students struggling with the scenarios, Ms. Medor acknowledges their discomfort, saying, “I can see that we are struggling through the task and perhaps you are starting to feel uncomfortable or frustrated. Remember, this activity is meant to make you think harder, so it’s worthwhile to persevere. Please ask us for help if you need it.” Mr. Gray and Ms. Medor circulate to continue to provide support to individuals and groups.

Class concludes with an individual written reflection about how to apply the concepts discussed in today’s lesson and carry them forth, beyond the classroom. Ms. Medor and Mr. Gray close by reminding the class that today’s lesson covered concepts that both students and teachers should think about, act on, and internalize on a daily basis. They thank the class for their engagement.

### **Reflection**

Consider Ms. Medor and Mr. Gray’s approach to SEL integration in this case study and reflect on your own practice. How do you cultivate a safe, or brave, classroom environment that allows for important conversations about equity?

# STRENGTHENING MINDSETS THROUGH WRITING REVISIONS

*Mr. Tallani sets high expectations for students and uses writing revisions as a way to provide intentional support around self-awareness, growth mindset, and self-efficacy.*

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**Grade level:** 8th grade

**Subject:** English Language Arts

**Topics:** Self-awareness, self-efficacy, growth mindset, writing, revisions

*Many thanks to our partners in the exSEL Network for submitting content for this & several other case studies.*

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By the time February rolls around in Mr. Tallani’s classroom, students know that they need to be ‘on their game’ in writing class, because Mr. Tallani expects them to always try their hardest. In fact, that’s one of the class norms that they [co-constructed](#) at the beginning of the year, alongside ‘use your resources,’ ‘listen to understand,’ and ‘everyone is a writer.’ Mr. Tallani often reminds his students: *“We are a team, and we’re all here to make one another better writers. This classroom is a safe space to try, to fail, to learn, and to use those learnings to succeed. It’s important to have a growth mindset as writers, because you’ll need to persevere and try new strategies, in order to improve your craft and reach your goals—both in school and in life.”*

At the beginning of class, Mr. Tallani begins by explaining the objectives, his academic expectations, and specific reminders of which resources are available to students on an as-needed, self-selected basis.

Then, students turn to the prompt for today’s opening activity: *“Think about a time when you felt a lack of confidence about a task that you eventually overcame. Why didn’t you think you could succeed at first? What helped increase your confidence? For example: Did you see a peer accomplish this task? Did you take baby steps and master it over time? Did you get a new resource like a peer-tutor or resource book? Did you reach out to a trusted adult? What eventually led to your success?”* Mr. Tallani gives the class a few minutes to jot down their thinking. Then, students turn and talk with a partner to share what they wrote.

As the conversation quiets down, Mr. Tallani draws the class’s attention to several posters of a [diverse set of famous writers](#), and he points out that just like the eighth graders sitting before him today, these famous writers faced many of the same struggles that are highlighted around the room. He tells the class a few [anecdotes](#) about writers who set goals and followed through with them, who struggled but eventually succeeded, and who thought they’d never get a book published and later went on to become very famous. Mr. Tallani takes care to emphasize the strategies that these writers used to overcome their obstacles, including choosing a new approach, deep breathing, listening to critical feedback, [dreaming](#), working with a mentor, and learning from peers. When asked to summarize a takeaway from these stories, students eagerly raise their hands. One student says, *“The writing process can seem daunting, but I can overcome my initial fears and struggles by relying on supports I’ve learned about in class and by believing in myself.”*

Mr. Tallani thanks the class for this discussion and invites students to take out their essays along with the accompanying [rubric](#) that the class created when the project began. Students take the next five minutes to self-assess and score their current drafts using the rubric. Mr. Tallani then asks them to pick an area of focus for the day, set a goal related to what they’ll revise, and identify one or more resources that will help them improve their essays.

Mr. Tallani models what that might sound like. *“After using the rubric, if I realize that I haven’t included enough references to expert sources, then I probably want to spend some time today going back to my research. My goal might be to include two additional references by the end of class today. The resources I’ll need are my index cards, my MLA citation guide, and a check-in with my friend once I’ve got my first reference written, just to make sure I’m on the right track.”* After this example, students begin identifying their goals. When three minutes have passed, using their norms for independent work time, Mr. Tallani invites students to spread out around the room, grab materials they might need, and begin revisions.

Students begin writing, reading, discussing, and revising. After fifteen minutes, Mr. Tallani asks the class to pause and check in on their process, asking, *“Are you feeling confident about meeting your goal? Have you faced any unexpected setbacks? Should you pivot and identify a new strategy to move you closer to your goal?”* After this quick reflection, students spend the rest of their class time working towards the goals they set.

Mr. Tallani walks around and provides support during this time. He spends five minutes with one student in particular who he overheard saying, *“I can’t do this! It’s too hard and there’s no hope for this essay!”* They work together to identify the root cause of the frustration, and they return to the class’s earlier discussion about strategies that famous writers used in order to overcome obstacles. With some coaching, the student decides to read a peer’s introductory paragraph, which sparks new ideas and helps the student get back on track.

With five minutes left at the end of the lesson, Mr. Tallani gives each student a [sticky note](#) and asks them to write one personal success on the front and one personal challenge on the back. He congratulates students for their hard work and collects the sticky notes as students exit the classroom.

### Reflection

Consider Mr. Tallani’s approach to SEL integration in this case study and reflect on your own practice. How do you promote self-awareness in your classroom? How do you create space and time for students to reflect on their learning?

# ENCOURAGING SELF-ADVOCACY IN STUDENT-LED MEETINGS

*Ms. Brunelle re-imagines Individualized Education Plan meetings to better serve students' social-emotional needs and foster their development of agency.*

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**Grade level:** 8th grade

**Subject:** Individualized Education Plan Meetings

**Topics:** Self-advocacy, agency, empowering students, conferencing, special education

*Many thanks to our partners, TeachPlus MA Policy Fellows, for submitting content for this & several other case studies.*

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Ms. Brunelle—an experienced 8th grade school counselor—participates in countless Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings each year. She has noticed that these meetings can often feel overwhelming to students and families. Families and students are expected to process a lot of new information in a short period of time, and they are not usually involved in the process of developing or implementing the strategies listed in the IEP. Ms. Brunelle decides that she wants to make a change so that her students will be empowered to lead their own IEP meetings and families will feel like the meetings are more accessible and impactful.

First, Ms. Brunelle assesses how IEP meetings are currently conducted and asks herself the following questions: *What are we doing for students that they could do on their own? Are students and families aware of the purpose and importance of IEPs? Are there opportunities for us to co-create plans with students and families, rather than imposing policies on them?* After she reflects on these questions, Ms. Brunelle holds an informal focus group for students and their families in order to better understand their perspectives on, and hopes for, IEP meetings.

From these focus groups, Ms. Brunelle confirms what she expected to hear: students and families often don't feel empowered to speak up and contribute to the meeting. She also learns several other things that add to her understanding of the situation. First, families note that sometimes they feel intimidated because they don't know what to expect from the meeting. Second, families express concern that these IEP meetings happen during the school day, which causes students to miss class when they participate. Other concerns relate to language and access to the content of the meetings; when family members speak a language other than English, which is the primary language spoken at school, they feel left out of the conversation even when there is an interpreter present.

Informed by these data, Ms. Brunelle calls a meeting with her colleagues (including school counselors and special education teachers) to assess and re-design the way IEP meetings are held in their school. Together, they decide to focus on teaching, modeling, and coaching students on how to lead their own IEP meetings. With the right approach, the educators feel confident that they will be able to address families' main concerns around access, clarity, scheduling, and involvement.

Ms. Brunelle holds a series of short meetings with a small group of students who have IEPs. In these meetings, students learn about the purpose and process of developing and revising IEPs, and they practice self-advocacy skills that can promote agency in the IEP process. Ms. Brunelle walks her students through a reflection to identify which aspects of the meetings are working well for them and which are not. Together, they co-create norms and clearly define each person's role and purpose, including that of the adults. They create user-friendly definitions of important terminology often used in meetings (i.e. IEP, modification, and

goals), and they create a ‘preparation guide’ to help students, families, and teachers fully participate in meetings. Because Ms. Brunelle knows students will need several opportunities to practice and receive coaching, she organizes mock IEP meetings in which students and teachers role play different scenarios. They also practice giving each other [constructive feedback](#) focused on how they led the meeting.

Right before an IEP meeting, Ms. Brunelle gives students a ‘pep talk’ to remind them of what they’ve learned and practiced and reiterate that she is there to support them. She also reminds the students of the guiding document they created together to reference whenever they need to. During the meeting, when Ms. Brunelle notices that a student is struggling to speak up, she subtly points to the co-constructed norms and strategies, and some choose to write out what they want to say, and then read it aloud. Similarly, when an educator uses jargon, she models for the student how to ask for clarification by saying “*Ms. Moore, can you define that word for me? I want to make sure I understand what is going on*”. Ms. Moore, who knows about the work that Ms. Brunelle has been doing with students, says “*Of course, thank you for the reminder to define terminology that we don’t use on a daily basis. We should add it to our glossary!*” At the end of the meeting, Ms. Brunelle prompts the student to do the closing they practiced: give a brief summary of what was said, share next steps (with Ms. Brunelle’s assistance), and thank everyone for their time.

At the end of the session, she has a 15-minute check in with the family member and the student to reflect on what went well and what can be done differently next time. She then connects with Ms. Moore briefly to pass along the feedback from the student and family member.

### Reflection

Consider Ms. Brunelle’s approach to SEL integration in this case study and reflect on your own practice. What do you do as an educator to create an environment where students feel empowered to learn and grow as learners, and develop their agency?

# CULTIVATING COMMUNITY DURING DISTANCE LEARNING

*Mr. Lopez establishes a morning meeting routine with his high school students and co-creates activities with students and colleagues to better support each other during distance learning.*

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**Grade level:** High school

**Subject:** General

**Topics:** Mindfulness, relationship building, stress management, communication, COVID-19, distance learning

*Many thanks to our partners in the exSEL Network for submitting content for this & several other case studies.*

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Mr. Lopez's high school is beginning the school year with distance learning. He is worried about his students' stress levels because some families have lost other sources of income due the COVID-19 pandemic, and many of his students are working part-time jobs to make ends meet at home. Though he knows his students are resilient, Mr. Lopez is worried about the impact this is having, and may continue to have, on students' social and emotional well-being.

After surveying his students about their needs and interests, Mr. Lopez decides to host a Wellness Wednesday series. He consults with colleagues who have the capacity, time, interest, and ability to help out with this new initiative. Together, the team develops a working draft of what Wellness Wednesdays will entail, and Mr. Lopez shares the draft with his students for feedback. He says to students, *"I read your surveys and I saw two things: we miss one another, and we are feeling very overwhelmed with all that is happening right now. I want to make sure we make space for us to continue building community and utilizing strategies that can help us feel more at connected and supported during these difficult times."* Students are thrilled to see educators' suggested areas of focus: community building through storytelling, self-management strategies, and mindfulness practices.

Every Wellness Wednesday meeting starts with mindfulness; students engage in a practice that helps them feel present and aware of what's happening in the moment. Some of the activities that Mr. Lopez uses are gratitude practices, which involve naming things they're grateful for, the [Mood Meter](#), which encourages students to name and address their emotions, and [Roses and Thorns](#), which invites reflection.

Then, Mr. Lopez makes space for storytelling, a technique he has used in the past to connect with students and help them in their social-emotional development. After sharing a story of his own, including examples of when he struggled to manage stress and how he is struggling right now during this pandemic, Mr. Lopez asks students to share their own stories, saying, *"Even though we are apart right now, and we are each dealing with our own unique challenges, I want us to try to connect and get to know ourselves, and each other, a little better. There is no shame in feeling sad, anxious, or fearful, as I hope I demonstrated in the personal story I just shared. Let's be here for each other."* Students begin to share their stories, following Mr. Lopez's lead. Some students even share poetry or music they have been writing.

After storytelling, Wellness Wednesday continues with breakout rooms. Students have an opportunity to connect with one another in a more informal way, choosing a room depending on the activity they want to do. Some options include a [current events dialogue](#), goal setting using the [WOOP Method](#), or [physical exercise](#) led by an adult.

Finally, before students log offline for the day, they participate in a short reflection and a [breathing exercise](#). The closing activity is first led by Mr. Lopez, but after a few weeks, the goal is to transition the facilitation to students who volunteer.

Mr. Lopez finds that the first few Wellness Wednesdays are very successful. Students consistently show up to these sessions, and some of the students are brainstorming new activities for upcoming Wellness Wednesdays.

### **Reflection**

Consider Mr. Lopez's approach to SEL integration in this case study and reflect on your own practice. How do you support social, emotional, and mental well-being through times of uncertainty, stress, and distance learning? How can you encourage community building among your students, even through a computer screen?

# ENGAGING IN CRITICAL REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

*Mr. Charles identifies resources on race and privilege and takes action in his history classes to engage in critical conversations with his students.*

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**Grade level:** High School

**Subject:** History

**Topics:** Self and social awareness, communication skills, identity, transformative SEL, courageous conversations

*Many thanks to our partners in the exSEL Network for submitting content for this & several other case studies.*

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*This case study is informed by the recommendations found in [Facing History and Ourselves' "Reflecting on George Floyd's Death and Police Violence Towards Black Americans"](#).*

Mr. Charles is concerned because some of his students are making uninformed or insensitive comments about the recent protests sparked by police brutality and racial injustice in the United States. He has heard comments during class like, “I’m not racist, so this isn’t about me,” “All lives matter,” or “Why can’t people just get along and stop with the agitation?” Mr. Charles has heard similar comments from students in past years, too, but he never felt equipped to intervene, and therefore he rarely ever did. This year, he decides that he wants to encourage [discussion about current events in class](#). As a high school history teacher, he is uniquely positioned to help students make connections between past and present events and become more informed and engaged citizens. Mr. Charles decides to use the power and privilege he holds to help his students strengthen their self- and social awareness.

Because he has never had explicit conversations about race, police brutality, or related topics with his students, Mr. Charles knows he needs to self-reflect and do some learning for himself prior to bringing these conversations into the classroom. Though Mr. Charles feels overwhelmed at first by the [resources](#) he collects from social media, colleagues, and family, he eventually identifies a short list of resources that will be most helpful. Mr. Charles also collaborates with other teachers from his district who are eager to work together on these efforts.

To promote their own individual growth, as well as increase their abilities to bring this learning into the classroom, the group of educators takes several steps over the course of the year:

**Practice.** First, they develop community agreements for their group. Then each adult makes an explicit commitment to the work, even though it feels uncomfortable for many of them. Next, they reflect using journals that help promote self-awareness, with questions such as, “How do I feel about current events and why? How does the news affect me? Do I benefit from, or participate, in systems of oppression? Why do I think I do, or don’t?” When they finish journaling, the educators engage in several dialogues around their reflections. After a few uncomfortable yet productive meetings, Mr. Charles and his colleagues create an implementation plan for extending the learning in the classroom.

**Prepare for teaching.** The educators decide that they will share relevant pieces of their honest reflections with their students about how they’re feeling, what they’re planning to do and why, and how they want to use these conversations to become better teachers. For example, Mr. Charles tells his students, “I love my job and I love teaching history. It is one of the things I am most proud of in my life. However, in the work that

*I've done these past couple of weeks with the staff, I realize that I have been teaching you an incomplete history that excludes the story of communities that have been marginalized for centuries. Because I want to honor our history as a nation, and because I care about your ability to think critically and be good citizens of this world, I want to challenge this class to continue learning with me. One of the first things we are going to do is engage in self-reflection to process current events in our country.”*

**Create a safe and brave environment.** Students need to feel safe, which includes equipping them with communication skills and tools. Modeled after his experience with his colleagues, Mr. Charles invites his students to co-create [classroom norms](#) for these conversations. Students read a short [article](#) on systemic racism and practice having a conversation using their new classroom norms. Mr. Charles prints a one-page document with sentence starters that students can use to engage with each other, such as: “*I hear you say X, is that correct?*” and “*When you said X, I thought about Y. I agree that X, but I feel torn about Y.*” After students read the article and practice engaging in a dialogue, they reflect on their experiences.

**Create space for student reflection.** To lead this reflection, Mr. Charles says, “*These are conversations that we haven’t had as a class before. Because it’s a subject that may spark different emotions in us, I want to make sure I understand how each of you are doing right now. I will ask you to submit a reflection each time we have these conversations. I will be the only person reading these journal entries, and I will gather a couple of trends from your reflections to share anonymously with the class afterwards. I hope that you have an opportunity to get to know yourself better, I hope that you spend some time processing what is happening in the world and how that impacts all of us in different ways, and I hope that you identify the questions you have about this topic, so that either myself or your peers can support your learning.*” Some of the questions in the reflection survey include:

- What do you know about what we discussed today?
- How do you feel when you talk about race?
- What questions do you have about your learning today?

As time goes on and students begin to feel more comfortable engaging in self-reflection as well as critical dialogues with one another, Mr. Charles and his fellow history teachers commit to continuing the conversations as a routine in history class. They also decide to build out a syllabus that intentionally highlights narratives that are excluded from their current history curriculum. Mr. Charles and his colleagues create opportunities for students to regularly provide feedback and share suggestions for readings, videos, or music that they think would contribute to their future learning.

### Reflection

Consider Mr. Charles' approach to SEL integration in this case study and reflect on your own practice. How do you engage in critical dialogues about racial justice with young people and colleagues? How can you invest time in personal reflection to advance your own awareness and actions?

# PRACTICING SOCIAL AWARENESS IN CHEMISTRY LAB

*Ms. Cargan establishes a classroom environment that helps students develop their social-emotional skills so that they can successfully conduct lab experiments in science class.*

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**Grade level:** High School

**Subject:** Science

**Topics:** Self-awareness, social awareness, communication skills, responsible decision making

*Many thanks to our partners in the exSEL Network for submitting content for this & several other case studies.*

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Ms. Cargan, a high-school science teacher, is preparing for the first chemistry lab of the school year. She has spent the last few weeks building her students' sense of self-awareness, responsible decision making, and communication skills. For instance, every Thursday and Friday for the past few weeks, Ms. Cargan has been using the first five minutes of class for independent journaling that targets those social-emotional competencies. Some of her prompts include questions like, “*What are your favorite types of projects? Do you prefer to work in teams or alone, and why? Describe an ideal team for you and what each team member is responsible for.*” As students write, she walks around to connect with at least two students each day. Once the independent writing time is over, Ms. Cargan often shares her own response to the prompt and encourages students to do the same, saying, “*I want to make sure your voice is included in our learning.*”

When Ms. Cargan introduces the class's first chemistry lab, she says to students, “*Get into your lab group. Take 10 minutes to get to know each other using these guiding questions: What are the supports that help you feel supported? Are there distractions that your team can help you avoid? What needs to happen so that you and your team are successful during this lab? Use information from your journal prompts, like “The [Take Care of Me List](#)”. Hold your questions for the end.*”

Ten minutes later, Ms. Cargan continues, “*Discuss how you can help one another follow these guidelines, then add another two norms to your contract that meet your teams' needs. Then, assign roles to each member of the team, like timekeeper or materials manager, and sign your document. You will check in with each other before every lab and use this document to hold one another accountable.*” Students work in their lab groups to complete these assignments. Then they acquire the materials they need and sit back down at their lab benches.

During the lab, Ms. Cargan walks around and checks in with each student for a few moments. She asks questions such as, “*Is your group sticking to its commitments? What barriers are you encountering as a group, and how is it affecting our lab work? What are some ways you can strengthen your collaboration?*” Any time she sees that students are following their own commitments, Ms. Cargan congratulates the team on working effectively together. At the end of the lab, Ms. Cargan asks students to reflect individually and as a team. She invites discussion, asking, “*What went well today? What can be better tomorrow? Why is it important that we focus on our group work and collaboration, and how do these things apply to our work as scientists?*”

## Reflection

Consider Ms. Cargan's approach to SEL integration in this case study and reflect on your own practice. During opportunities for cooperative learning, how do you help students make responsible decisions, reflect on their participation in groups, and work effectively together to achieve strong results?

## PROMOTING SEL IN ADULT LEADERSHIP MEETINGS

*The leadership team at the Kindred Regional School District, led by Mrs. Patel and Mr. Powell, engage regularly in social-emotional activities as a way to strengthen their own adult skills and mindsets as well as experience new techniques to promote SEL with staff and students.*

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**Audience:** Staff

**Subject:** Adult Professional Development

**Topics:** Self-awareness, social awareness, vulnerability

*Many thanks to our partners in the exSEL Network for submitting content for this & several other case studies.*

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For the past few months, members of the leadership team at Kindred Regional School District have been working to create a new strategic plan that will clarify and update the school's priorities for the next five years. The team, which is comprised of Superintendent Patel, Assistant Superintendent Powell, building principals, and several directors, has identified social-emotional learning as one of the foundational pillars of their new plan. Mrs. Patel and Mr. Powell have emphasized that the district's SEL-focused work *must* focus on supporting adults as well as young people.

Mrs. Patel and Mr. Powell have long cared about the safety, well-being, and happiness of the community they lead. They've worked together for three years now, and they believe that by helping adults strengthen their social-emotional skills, they can have an enormous impact on the way students experience school. Mrs. Patel and Mr. Powell also firmly believe that they must lead by example, so they have arranged for the district's leadership team to engage in a new professional learning opportunity focused on SEL.

The leadership team meets monthly, and no matter what the meeting's topic is, the agenda always begins with Mr. Powell leading the team through an [icebreaker activity](#). There is a shared expectation that all members of the team will participate, in order to strengthen relationships, reflect on important topics, and build a team that can effectively collaborate to accomplish big goals. After each meeting's icebreaker activity, Mr. Powell leads the group through a 5-minute metacognitive discussion about the SEL-related takeaways. He asks the group, "From this activity, what did we learn about ourselves and our team? Which social-emotional competencies and mindsets were addressed in this particular activity? How might this activity be modified for use in your own school buildings?" This explicit attention to modeling practices for use in one's own school has helped SEL gain popularity in many buildings, even before SEL was announced as part of the district's new strategic plan.

This past summer, the leadership team took time during their back-to-school retreat to set group norms around confidentiality, feedback, and communication, which laid the foundation for supportive working relationships throughout the school year. Mrs. Patel and Mr. Powell regularly return to those co-created norms with the group, encouraging leaders to provide real-time feedback on their agendas and chosen activities. They invite suggestions for activities to use in future sessions, too, which builds buy-in and shared ownership over this work. Because a foundation of trust has been thoughtfully established within the leadership team, all members feel seen, valued, and heard.

During one meeting, Mrs. Patel and Mr. Powell set aside an entire hour for leaders to participate in an SEL [activity](#) focused on leadership that promotes self-awareness, social awareness, and vulnerability. They

invite the team to begin by reflecting on a series of questions about leadership that are aligned with several pre-readings:

1. How do you think those around you benefit from your leadership?
2. How would you describe yourself as a leader?
  - a. What are some of your strengths as a leader? Do you want to leverage them further, and if so, how?
  - b. What aspects of your leadership do you want to strengthen? How might you continue to grow in this area?
3. How do the pre-reading articles relate to your own perception of leadership?
  - a. [Self Awareness and the Effective Leader](#)
  - b. [What Self-Awareness Really Is \(and How to Cultivate It\)](#)
  - c. [Getting Beyond the BS of Leadership Literature](#)

After the team has a chance to write down their thoughts, Mrs. Patel and Mr. Powell model vulnerability by sharing their stories first. They spend a few minutes each, thinking aloud about the role of leadership, their own strengths, and the ways they can improve. This sets the tone for the conversation and invites other team members to be vulnerable as they self-reflect. After everyone shares, Mrs. Patel and Mr. Powell thank the group and bring them together for one final discussion. They follow Mr. Powell’s usual closing prompts: *“From this activity, what did we learn about ourselves and our team? Which social-emotional skills and mindsets were addressed in this particular activity? And lastly, how might this activity be modified for use in your own buildings?”*

During their weekly check-in meeting a few days later, Mrs. Patel and Mr. Powell reflect on how powerful that activity was and how much closer they feel to their leadership team as a result. They wonder what’s next and begin to plan future activities.

### **Reflection**

Consider Mrs. Patel and Mr. Powell’s approach to SEL integration in this case study and reflect on your own practice. If you are a district or school leader, how do you support your colleagues’ social and emotional well-being?

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