
SEL Systems Brief

Three Core Insights on Portfolio Design, Relational Practice, and Developmental Equity—with Actionable Recommendations

Purpose of This Brief

This brief distills three cross-school findings from a recent SEL systems review and pairs each with concrete action recommendations. Each section names a pattern observed across sites, explains the mechanism driving it, and specifies what leaders and the field should do differently. The central conclusion is not that schools lack effort; it is that effort is fragmented. The path to stronger, more consistent outcomes runs through alignment, codification, and disciplined execution.

INSIGHT 1 The Portfolio Divide Is Coherence vs. Diffusion—Not Commitment

What We See: Schools with stronger SEL outcomes organize their work through a small number of repeatable structures. Schools that struggle often have many strategies on paper, but the execution infrastructure is incomplete.

Common signs of incomplete infrastructure include:

- Unclear ownership of who is responsible for delivery
- Curriculum that is not codified or consistently used
- Assessment plans that remain unsettled or inconsistent
- Walkthrough feedback that does not reflect SEL priorities
- Role clarity has not been established across the staff

The Mechanism: Staff can execute a narrow routine repeatedly. They cannot execute a broad strategy set consistently without stronger operating discipline. A long list of strategies without supporting systems produces diffusion—effort without traction.

The problem is rarely a lack of commitment. It is a portfolio that asks too much without first building the infrastructure to deliver any of it well.

INSIGHT 2 Relational Strength Can Mask—but Not Replace—Systematization

What We See: Some schools show strong climate and relationship data alongside an incomplete SEL architecture. Strong adult practice can locally compensate for weak systems, but only temporarily and unevenly.

This pattern appears at multiple levels:

- School-wide: strong climate data despite gaps in codified curriculum, consistent walkthroughs, or shared language
 - Classroom-level: strong participation and relational routines in some rooms, even where school-wide consistency is still developing
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The Mechanism: Skilled, relationship-centered adults can produce real SEL outcomes for the students in front of them. But without codification, those outcomes are not reproducible across classrooms or sustainable across staff turnover. Students receive an uneven SEL “diet” depending on which adults they encounter.

Relational strength is an asset to build on—not a substitute for systems work. The goal is to capture what strong practitioners do and make it institutional rather than individual.

INSIGHT 3 Instructional and Extracurricular Settings Are Not Reinforcing the Same Competencies

What We See: The SEL competencies being developed differ significantly by setting. This creates equity gaps for students who access only one context.

The pattern across settings:

- Instruction tends to emphasize communication and self-management-adjacent skills
- Extracurriculars do more of the developmental work on belonging, identity, contribution, and relationship-building
- Students with access to only one context receive incomplete developmental exposure

The Systemic Gap: The same under-addressed skills—reading social cues and managing emotions—remain weak across both domains. These are not being systematically addressed in either setting.

Students who do not participate in extracurricular activities are not receiving the relational and identity development that those settings provide. Instruction cannot assume that out-of-classroom settings will fill the gap.

ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS

ACTION 1 Force Every Data Conversation to End in One Target Skill and One Adult Move

Many schools are collecting assessment, academic, attendance, student voice, observational, or climate data—but are not reliably converting that data into instructional action. Data meetings conclude without a clear commitment.

The Requirement: Every data review should close with a single, written statement in this form:

“Our target student skill is X, so adults will consistently do Y.”

This is not an additional layer of planning. It is a replacement for open-ended data discussion that produces no instructional commitment. The statement names the student outcome, specifies the adult behavior, and creates a reviewable artifact for the next cycle.

The shift: from “we reviewed our data” to “here is what adults will do differently by next review.”

ACTION 2 Address the Cross-Context SEL Gap Directly in Program Design

Because extracurriculars are carrying more of the relationship, identity, and contribution work—and classrooms are carrying more of the communication and self-management-adjacent work—schools must intentionally redistribute exposure.

The Design Principle: The highest-leverage move is not to duplicate everything everywhere. It is to fill the shared blind spots that neither setting is currently addressing.

The three competencies that represent the most consistent gaps across both domains are:

- Explicit emotion management
- Reading social cues
- Culturally responsive peer interaction

This recommendation is consistent with the CASEL framework and with the principle from Jones & Kahn (2017) that transfer improves when competencies are reinforced across settings rather than siloed in a single domain.

Focus less on adding more SEL activities. Focus more on alignment and consistency—particularly for the skills that neither setting currently addresses well.

ACTION 3 Shift from Planning Support to Execution, Monitoring, and Continuous Improvement

The primary implementation gap is not in structural design—it is in translating structures into consistent classroom-level practice. Schools that have complete SEL architectures on paper still show uneven execution at the instructional level.

The Field-Level Implication: Urban Assembly’s work—and the broader SEL field—must shift from supporting schools in planning SEL systems to ensuring schools can consistently execute, monitor, and refine instructional practice through continuous improvement cycles.

This means the support model changes:

- Less: helping schools create or refine their SEL plans and frameworks
 - More: developing school capacity to observe adult practice, identify gaps in real time, and make instructional adjustments within a structured CI cycle
 - The measure of success is not a completed plan—it is observable, consistent adult practice aligned to a named student skill
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The issue isn't effort—it's fragmentation. Aligning what adults do and what students experience across settings will drive stronger, more consistent outcomes.

Recommended Questions for Leader Reflection

Use these questions as a leadership team to assess your current state:

On Portfolio Coherence: Can every staff member name the 2–3 SEL structures they are expected to use consistently? If not, the portfolio may be diffuse.

On Relational Practice: If your strongest SEL practitioner left tomorrow, what would remain? What is codified versus carried in individual expertise?

On Cross-Setting Equity: Which students have the least access to extracurricular programming? What SEL competencies are they missing as a result?

On Data Use: When did your last data review produce a specific, written adult commitment? If you cannot name it, the review did not close with an action.

On Execution: Does your support model prioritize helping schools plan—or helping them execute, observe, and improve? Which does your current staff time reflect?

This brief is intended to support structured discussion and planning. Schools should validate these patterns against their own data. Research citation: Jones, S. M., & Kahn, J. (2017). The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development. Aspen Institute.
