From the Central Office to the Classroom: Scaling Social-Emotional Learning in Fresno Unified

How one of California’s largest school districts promotes student success through SEL measurement and a culture of collaboration

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Executive Summary

Panorama Education has supported Fresno Unified School District with social-emotional learning (SEL) and school climate surveys and data reports since 2015. As our partnership with leaders in Fresno Unified progressed, more and more districts began contacting us to better understand how they could best support students’ social-emotional learning skills. Through our shared work, we recognized Fresno Unified as a visionary district that has made tremendous organizational progress with social-emotional learning.

In November 2016, members of the Panorama Education team visited Fresno Unified to observe and document their work in order to share their practices with other interested schools and districts across the nation. For two days, our team interviewed school and district leaders, observed professional learning meetings, visited school sites, and hosted focus groups of principals.

In this case study, we present the structures and processes that leaders in Fresno Unified have used to create district-wide capacity to realize the promise of social-emotional learning for their 74,000 students.

To learn more and watch the video interviews, visit www.panoramaed.com/resources/fresno.
Introduction

As California’s fourth largest and the nation’s forty-sixth largest school district, Fresno Unified School District supports the needs of more than 74,000 students—approximately 90 percent of which are students of color (67.7% Hispanic, 11.4% Asian, 8.7% African American) and 88 percent live in poverty—across 106 schools every day. In a 2016 analysis of national socioeconomic data, The Brookings Institution include Fresno in a group of “regions with greatest concentrations of poverty in 2010-14 among the poorest metro areas overall.”

Un fortunately, the challenge of poverty in Fresno is not new. Ten years earlier, in 2006, Brookings released a report focused solely on the city, “Confronting Concentrated Poverty in Fresno.” In the report, Brookings uses the 2000 census data to calculate that, amongst the 50 largest US cities, Fresno had not only the fourth largest overall poverty rate, but the highest rate of concentrated poverty.

Families in areas with high concentrations of poverty face challenges “over and above the negative consequences of a lack of sufficient income,” Brookings concludes. These additional disadvantages can include higher crime rates, lower quality housing options, added costs for accessing public services, and

The challenges that many Fresno Unified students face beyond the walls of their schools is mission-defining for the district’s leadership: “The only way out of concentrated poverty is through concentrated education,” says former Superintendent Michael Hanson, who served the district for twelve years, from 2005 to 2017. “That’s a deep held belief in Fresno Unified —everything we try to do is concentrate education for kids. We have folks who are desperately well below the poverty line. What families are up against and kids by extension, is daunting and striking.”

“We’re in a whole new world and we should be measuring and supporting kids in their full and complete development.”

Michael Hanson

Hanson understands the realities of urban education well: “It can take years of work to combat some of the systemic issues, and to align our work with city government to get the district moving in the right direction.” During Hanson’s tenure, Fresno Unified made significant progress to support and educate the whole child. This emphasis on social-emotional learning aligns to the district’s board-approved, five-year goals adopted in 2014, which declare that “All students will demonstrate the character and competencies for workplace success.”

During this time, the district worked strategically with its board, staff members, and community to clarify its belief system and then to align these beliefs with its measurement and support structures: “When you’re measuring the growth of an entire human being, you’re not just going to talk about a math and an English Language Arts score on an end of year test, one time,” says Hanson. “You’re going to talk about how they’re progressing toward graduation. You’re going to talk about how they’re feeling about themselves. Whether they’re engaged in arts activities and athletics. I think we’re in a whole new world and we should be measuring and supporting kids in their full and complete development.”

Today, support for students’ SEL is robust and active at every level of Fresno Unified’s school system as a result of:

- Collecting SEL data through student and teacher self-report surveys
- Implementing new SEL curricula and learning opportunities
- Expanding the capacity and resources available to key departments and staff
- Leveraging team-based, peer learning structures that build a bridge between the district and school-level champions
- Sharing school-level data both internally and externally to create a culture of support and transparency

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The Origins of Social-Emotional Learning in Fresno Unified

“We have been collecting data through different surveys, such as the parent survey, the student survey, and the staff survey for well over 12 years,” says Malati Gopal, an analyst in the Department of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment, who manages the district’s survey and data analysis programs. “It all started under the framework of Title IV where the requirement was the California Healthy Kids Survey.”

“We knew that we had to find something that was more complete to talk about the development of our youth, not just their academic progress.”

Michael Hanson

The district administered the California Healthy Kids Survey annually to report on students’ risk behaviors, including drug and alcohol use. But for Hanson, the survey failed to provide a complete picture of students’ social and emotional well-being, and it lacked relevant data for practitioners to act upon: “The California Health Kids Survey measured some things, but it was of little value to us at the local school district and certainly offered even less value to our teachers. So we knew that we had to find something that was more complete to talk about the development of our youth, not just their academic progress.”

In 2010, Fresno Unified’s leaders began collaborating with leaders from Sacramento City Unified and Oakland Unified, sharing best practices and knowledge. This collaboration not only introduced Hanson to SEL measurement and supports, but also formed the basis for a collaboration that would garner national attention in the years ahead—the CORE Districts.
“We worked very closely with our superintendent colleagues in other urban districts in California,” says Hanson. “I would hear them talk about their work with CASEL [the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning] and I started to hear more and more about social-emotional learning. That’s when I realized that it was something that there were labels for and that we needed to be more in tune with if we were going to more fully describe progress of our youth, especially kids living against incredibly challenging circumstances.”

By the 2011-2012 school year, Fresno Unified had already committed itself to deepening the use of holistic, student-centered approaches. The district implemented the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework through the use of Safe & Civil Schools. The district also continued to administer the California Healthy Kids Survey before redesigning its annual school climate survey, which asks students to respond to questions related to school safety, bullying, and engagement. In 2014-2015, the district introduced restorative practices to several of its school sites and has since expanded the approach methodically to other schools.

According to Malati Gopal, the survey programs continued to show signs of progress: “We as a district made the decision that this data was very important to our schools and our work. Previously, when I was doing this work from the Title IV lens, it was more under compliance—that health education needs to be implemented at a certain time and that surveys need to be completed—but schools did not necessarily engage with the data.”

The CORE Districts

The informal collaboration between leaders of nine of California’s largest school districts—Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento, Oakland, Long Beach, Santa Ana, Sanger, Garden Grove, and Fresno—would become formalized under the California Office of Reform in Education. Known as the “CORE Districts,” their mission is to “work together to innovate, implement, and scale successful strategies and tools that help our students succeed, so that all student are prepared for college and career.” In all, these districts serve roughly 1 in 5 students across California, supporting over one million students in districts across the state.

Two years later in 2013, the CORE Districts gained national attention by becoming the first and only districts without state representation to receive a waiver from the US Department of Education under No Child Left Behind. The waiver granted the CORE Districts the opportunity to define their own accountability system, which would be shared across most of the participating member districts. The districts developed the “School Quality Improvement Index” (SQII) to serve as their accountability system, including indicators from, academic domains (e.g. academic
performance, high school readiness, graduation rates), as well as social-emotional and culture-climate factors.

With data collected through student self-report surveys, the SQII featured school-level indicators about students’ behaviors and beliefs in school. The CORE Districts selected four SEL constructs to measure: growth mindset, social awareness, self-efficacy, and self-management. These constructs were selected based on the substantial body of research highlighting the importance of students’ social and emotional skills, attitudes, and behaviors for success in school and beyond. Some district leaders also embraced teacher perception surveys about individual students’ SEL skills, which provided an additional perspective for understanding students’ SEL skills in the school setting.

The CORE Districts partnered with leading research and non-profit organizations, including Angela Duckworth, Transforming Education, and Panorama Education, to develop valid and reliable measurement instruments that would feed data into the index. To collect and analyze perception data, Fresno Unified and other members of the CORE Districts partnered with Panorama Education to distribute interactive SEL reports and survey data dashboards.

After serving as president of the CORE Districts’ board of directors, Hanson believes the SQII is a fundamentally new way to think about the value of accountability systems for school districts. “We’re now talking about the performance of a school, a grade-level, a classroom, a teacher, a principal as now being measured more rationally, more fairly, more holistically, for the whole child. It’s being used as a flashlight to bring to light what we need to improve upon. It’s not a hammer.” While this new, more holistic accountability system recognized educators for the wide-ranging work they do and provided more actionable data insights, many challenges remained.

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Leaders in Fresno Unified knew that SEL would only reach the district’s students if it was buttressed by robust structures and a culture of collaboration. While the progress was marked, SEL was yet to come to life in the places that matter most for kids: Fresno Unified’s schools and classrooms.
Defining Structures to Support Social-Emotional Learning

With strong measurement tools and processes in place, the next step was to increase the capacity of Fresno Unified’s central office. If schools were to capitalize on the full potential of the newly available data, they would need both resources and support to bring SEL to life for students.

The district made a strategic decision in 2014 to expand the Department of Prevention and Intervention. This department includes a Climate and Culture Division, which is responsible for all supports and services provided to schools in three areas: School Climate, Restorative Practices, and Behavior Intervention. Rita Baharian serves as Director of Climate and Culture, where she leads the district’s supports for SEL.

“When I started two years ago, it was my first time seeing a district measure social-emotional learning,” says Baharian. “It was one of the pieces that really helped put a flashlight on social-emotional learning. If it’s in our belief system and now it’s embedded in our measurement, it brings a different focus and light to social-emotional learning. However, at that point in time, we weren’t at a place of sustainability. We said, ‘Okay, how is this going to work on a scale of 106 schools?’”

The Department of Prevention and Intervention expanded significantly, adding not only Baharian as director, but seven full-time teachers on special assignment (TSAs), and over thirty full-time specialists. While, the specialists—mostly counselors and social workers—do provide coaching to adults, the majority of their work is to provide direct services to students.
Thus, the expansion of the specialist group was an increase in direct student services. The department also secured meaningful partnerships that provided shared resources from city government and peer mentoring programs. Fresno Unified’s district leaders agreed that they needed to embed SEL into instruction and daily interactions with students in order to achieve its full potential.

“Social-emotional learning only happens where teaching and learning is the basic form and function of the institution every day: the school,” says Hanson. “And it’s not a superintendent’s job. It’s not going to happen because we’ve written a position paper or posted something on the web. It’s because a teacher is looking a kid dead in the eye and understanding where that child is and is working with that kid to help them understand themselves so that they can build that confidence, so they can build that self awareness, so they can build that self-management skill.”

Climate and Culture Teams

To build a bridge between the district and its schools, Fresno Unified’s leaders relied upon a professional learning community at every school site. Dubbed the “Climate and Culture Teams,” these small groups represent a cross section of each school and are comprised of teachers, classified staff members (e.g. office staff or campus liaison), and an administrator who actively participates.

The teams meet monthly to process and evaluate data related to school climate, attendance, and behavior and to create and track strategic plans for addressing students’ social-emotional and climate needs utilizing the district’s Climate and Culture Tier I Implementation Rubric. These teams
are also responsible for soliciting staff and student feedback, a critical component for grounding the climate and culture work at every school.

“The Climate and Culture Teams really focus on the Tier I approach, also known as the universal tier—that all kids have access to—which embodies school-wide practices that relate to discipline, social-emotional learning, and classroom practices,” explains Baharian. “They come together each month to look at their data and make decisions based off that data. They might focus on growth mindset, staff engagement, or student engagement.”

Professional Learning By Region

Twice per year, members of every Climate and Culture Team in the district attend professional learning opportunities—full-day workshops with peer teams from within their region (Fresno Unified defines a region as one high school and the elementary and middle schools that feed into it) that are hosted by the School Climate Office. The trainings build capacity among each region’s schools by having each team engage in learning, develop and align school-wide and classroom practices, and analyze data to monitor progress toward each site’s implementation goals.

“We’re really focusing on leveraging our regional trainings to maximize and push forward this SEL work.”

Rita Baharian

“Many of our schools actually have a focus area that they do regionally. For example, one school mentioned attendance was one of theirs. Another has social-emotional learning and growth mindset embedded in theirs. So we’re really focusing on leveraging our regional trainings to maximize and push forward this SEL work,” explains Baharian.

These regional trainings are designed to meet multiple goals: to create space for shared collaboration, to increase team members’ awareness and depth of knowledge of SEL, to discuss ways to teach SEL skills to students directly, and to dig into school-level data from surveys, as well as behavior and attendance reports. During the fall regional trainings, teams deepened their understanding of self-awareness and social awareness and how it impacts relationships and learning. Teams also examined strategies for growing these competencies in themselves and in their students.

In the spring, Climate and Culture Team members are provided access to the results of the district’s school climate and SEL surveys. Every team member can log in to view school-wide survey data through Panorama’s online platform, as well as results from every other school in the district. The decision to make available all information from every school site was deliberate, as district leaders sought to build a culture of transparency and peer collaboration.
With training from the School Climate Office staff, each team uses Panorama’s data inquiry tools and engage in meaningful discussions based on their observations. This level of shared collaboration supports the district in developing a culture of shared responsibility that promotes a positive climate and culture at every school site.

**Teachers on Special Assignment**

Fresno Unified leadership believes that SEL is a set of skills that students should be taught explicitly. This means that teachers and school staff who interface directly with children every day are the conduits for cultivating students’ SEL skills and mindsets. As a result, the district created roles for seven teachers on special assignment in the School Climate Office. The vision for these TSAs was twofold: one, to create a seamless bridge between the central office and school sites, and two, to move towards action by supporting principals and teachers directly in the application of climate and culture practices.

Lauren Cascarano was one of the office’s first TSAs and has witnessed the evolution of the role over time: “We've changed a lot over the last two years. When I started, there were three teachers on special assignment for the whole district. And now, there’s one for each region, so there are seven of us in total.” While the TSA role in most districts involves a teacher stepping further away from school-based work, Fresno Unified’s school climate TSAs are tasked with embedding themselves in the work happening at each school site.

In fact, the TSAs have an office at the district headquarters, but you will rarely find them there. These TSAs are the foremost content experts in SEL, school climate, proactive classroom practices, and bullying prevention, and they guide this work forward by collaborating directly with school-based staff on a weekly basis.

The district has emphasized the importance of relationship-building between the TSAs and their respective school sites: “Teachers on Special Assignment build a relationship over a period of time as they serve their schools, and that relationship takes them to a different place in their work together. TSAs truly represent a structure in our district that pays heed to the importance of developing a deep relationship,” says Gopal, who supports the TSAs with data analysis.

“I can’t stress enough the importance of having a relationship between the district and the school teams,” adds Nicole Gorban, a second-year TSA in the School Climate Office. “It is the main glue that keeps us together. If there is no relationship between us and our schools, then they feel that the district is trying to make them do something or enforce something at their sites. But with this communication system in place, schools feel more open to investigating some of the ideas that the district wants to propose.”

To Cascarano, the impact of this work is visible when working with school teams: “I had a couple teachers come up to me and say ‘I really appreciate every time you come and do workshops at our
school site. I always take away something from your training that I can actually apply into my class, and it’s helping me become a better teacher.’ That’s really the best feeling for me. I’m actually helping someone that’s going to go impact children’s lives.”

Social-Emotional Learning Institute

In the summer of 2016, the School Climate Office hosted an intensive, four-day “Social-Emotional Learning Institute” for twenty K-6 teachers from across the district. The professional learning opportunity was targeted; teachers were invited to participate based on their use of proactive classroom practices, their involvement with Climate and Culture Teams, and their expressed interest in SEL.

The goal for the first cohort of teachers was to explore the critical role that adults play in the development of students’ SEL skills. These teachers conceived of and documented various approaches that would connect SEL skills to academic content areas, starting with ELA and math, and developed implementation plans to apply in their classrooms in the fall.

“This SEL will come alive when teachers are talking to other teachers about it, when teachers are able to go see other teachers doing it,” says Baharian, who organizes the SEL Institutes. “So we did a lot of hands-on work with these teachers. We looked at our Instructional Practice Guide in our district, which outlines what instruction at every classroom should look like. Our teachers were to highlight, ‘Oh, I can see where joy of learning or productive struggle fits in. I see where SEL could live in this body of work.’ So we have to help our teachers make connections to current district practices and teaching standards.”

With this teacher-led approach, district leaders empowered teachers to become the champions for SEL in the district: “We, as districts leaders, were able to learn on a smaller scale what we would need to modify and improve in order to bring this work district-wide in the years ahead,” says Baharian.

During the 2016-2017 school year, the School Climate Office will host three additional SEL Institutes, one during the winter and two in the summer. Once teachers attend an institute, they stay involved by attending bi-monthly professional learning communities that support implementation and continued collaboration. It is with these small groups of teachers that Baharian and her colleagues seek to identify the necessary conditions for scaling SEL practices that will make an impact for students in the classroom. By seeding a grassroots movement with the SEL Institutes, leaders in Fresno Unified have empowered teachers to become internal champions of the work.
Using Social-Emotional Learning Data in Schools

With robust and focused leadership at the central office, Climate and Culture Teams in each school, and TSAs connecting the work between both groups, Fresno Unified made significant strides in developing the foundation for SEL to grow in the district. In order to facilitate positive change in each of its school sites, district leaders recognized the need to continue delivering actionable data to its school teams.

“We started by adding social-emotional indicators into our district’s equity and access database,” says Hanson, referring to Fresno Unified’s district-wide data system. “We try to make all of our data actionable when we give it to you, so that we expect you to make change in the present. This way we haven’t wasted immense amounts of time that could have been intervening or supporting a student or their family.”

Case Study: Robinson Elementary School

Accordingly, district leaders worked closely with Panorama Education to deliver SEL data reports directly to school leaders. For Brian Wulf, a second-year principal at Robinson Elementary, Panorama’s reports offered an opportunity to gain valuable insights from his peers: “Last year when the information was given to us from Panorama, we were all sitting in a room together. We were able to pull up our reports, and one of the things we do a lot of right now, especially with the
schools that we’re closest with, is shared collaboration. We instantly started sharing our information with each other. We looked at where we’re at in terms of the district average, and then we started having conversations about what’s happening at your school site that’s promoting success.”

To Wulf and other principals in Fresno Unified, this level of collaboration is made possible by the district leadership’s decision to share all school-level results across the district. As a result, Wulf noticed a culture of openness and support: “We’re able to have very productive, honest conversations that are free of judgment,” says Wulf. “We have no fear about saying, ‘Hey, this is not going well with me right now. What are you guys doing that is helping you to overcome this challenge and obstacle? How are you meeting the needs of your parents? How are you improving the perception of your children?’”

With direct access to survey results, principals also use climate and SEL data to craft a “Single Plan for Student Achievement” at every school site. This annual school-level plan organizes educators to identify their school's areas for growth, including those in SEL and climate domains, that align with
the district's strategic goals. In doing so, survey data has gained traction as a key indicator for school-level progress, as educators are equipped with the necessary tools to make and validate changes in practice on their own terms.

“We're able to have very productive, honest conversations that are free of judgment.”

Brian Wulf

The result is an environment where every educator feels empowered to take risks and find new ways to support students: “We feel very empowered to take on the work. We've been given some pretty clear challenges of things we're expected to take on,” says Wulf. “These are social issues within our community and it's with the understanding that we'll have backing while we do it, which makes it so you're not afraid to try new things because if you fail, at least you're trying something new.”

Principal Wulf’s perspective illuminates the product of years of work: a culture that promotes peer learning, shared accountability, and a growth mindset. It is this culture that holds the greatest potential for delivering on the social and emotional needs of students in Fresno Unified. By committing to a deeply-held belief system that includes measurement, collaboration around data, and support at every level, Fresno Unified’s leaders have successfully brought SEL to a place of sustainability and impact for students in the district.
What’s Next for Social-Emotional Learning in Fresno Unified

Today, Fresno Unified School District has put a flashlight on students’ SEL. By supporting teachers and staff in schools, defining new organizational structures, and developing powerful measurements and data sharing systems, the district has created the foundation for SEL to flourish for its 74,000 students.

To Rita Baharian, this deliberate approach has been key for helping schools use the data: “We went slow and steady. We didn’t come at it from ‘you have to do this,’ or by forcing compliance. Instead we’ve come from ‘Okay we see this in the data. We see a high suspension rate or we’re looking at your surveys and we’re seeing kids are not feeling connected. So how can we put some actions behind that to change that outcome?’ I’m excited to see what’s going to happen in the next three or four years here.”

“We went slow and steady...I’m excited to see what's going to happen in the next three or four years here”

Rita Baharian

Malati Gopal, the analyst in Fresno Unified’s research department, shares a similar vision for the district’s SEL work: “I hope that in every classroom SEL is not discussed as a separate component. But it’s something that we breathe and we actually live every single day.”

While there is still much progress to be made, Fresno Unified has realized signs of success; most recently, the district announced that its schools achieved an 83.8% graduation rate, the highest rate in the district’s history. This figure reflects gains of over 14 percentage points in the past eight years, besting both the state and national averages with meaningful progress towards closing gaps between student groups.
Reflecting on the district’s progress to date, Michael Hanson pictures what SEL means for Fresno Unified’s students: “What I hope comes out of the work around SEL in Fresno is that more kids, more consistently, have more great days. Being able to think about who you are and how you control and monitor and grow yourself is as essential as anything else you’re going to be taught in school. And it is the biggest life lesson you can take forward from us.”

“What I hope comes out of the work around SEL in Fresno is that more kids, more consistently, have more great days.”

Michael Hanson

After years of deliberate progress, the path for helping students succeed as college and career ready graduates in Fresno Unified has been strengthened by SEL: “I think we’ve got multiple years to get there,” Hanson adds. “But we’re well on our way. I would characterize us in Fresno as we have liftoff.”
About us

Panorama Education partners with schools, districts, charter networks, and state departments of education to collect and analyze data about social-emotional learning, school climate, family engagement, and more. With research-backed surveys and a leading technology platform, Panorama helps educators act on data to improve student outcomes. Panorama has supported more than 6 million students in 6,500 schools across 40 states, including those in the New York City Department of Education, Dallas Independent School District, Seattle Public Schools, Broward County Public Schools, and San Francisco Unified School District.

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