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ADVANCING AND SUSTAINING STUDENT AND STAFF WELLBEING INITIATIVES:

A Resource Guide for States



The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, Bureau of Indian Education, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions. CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress, and the public.

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OVERVIEW

Student and staff wellbeing are essential to student success in school, from academic attainment to positive school engagement and motivation.¹ School conditions that are conducive to positive learning and development are a foundation for wellbeing, as supportive, responsive learning environments are necessary to ensure that all school community members can thrive.² While many state education agencies (SEAs) have been implementing wellbeing initiatives for multiple years, states are now recognizing the need to amplify these efforts in an era of growing inequities and intensifying needs exacerbated by the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. State leaders can take action to advance and sustain wellbeing initiatives that address existing and growing disparities in education and health outcomes and that create the conditions for students and the adults who care for them to thrive socially, emotionally and academically.

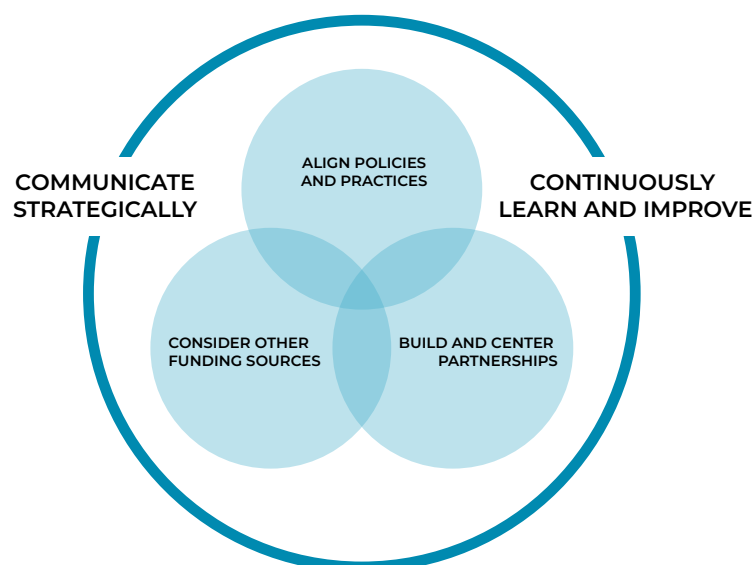
In 2020 and 2021, the passage of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds allocated over \$190 billion to SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs), laying a foundation for recovery from the pandemic that includes efforts to serve the whole person. Across the country, state and local leaders are applying this funding toward a multitude of wellbeing efforts, including connecting students and staff to mental health services and supports, implementing universal programs and supports through a multi-tiered system focused on student and staff wellbeing and connection, utilizing school culture and climate data to inform schoolwide support systems, formalizing partnerships with community-based organizations to bolster local capacity and implementing strategies to support educator wellbeing.

¹ Lindorff, A. (2018). *The impact of promoting student well-being on student academic and non-academic outcomes: An analysis of the evidence*. Oxford Impact. Oxford University Press. <https://oxfordimpact.oup.com/home/wellbeing-impact-study/>

² Office of Elementary & Secondary Education (2020). *Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund/>

Given that ESSER funds are a one-time-only infusion into the system, SEAs and LEAs are understandably contemplating how they can sustain programs and practices after the funding is over. However, sustainability is contingent upon more than access to recurring funding. To ensure that existing wellbeing initiatives last beyond single grant periods, leaders can maintain operational stewardship by allocating resources strategically, assessing agency readiness and capacity to carry the work forward and implementing activities that are relevant to the conditions in their communities. In this way, planning for sustainability is a continuous, dynamic process that can span several strategies, from securing new funding to managing and leveraging financial and other resources to incorporating policies and practices into partnering organizations to ensure alignment and continuity. Leaders should also be adaptive, working to sustain programs fiscally, as well as operationally and ideologically. Sustainability also involves focusing on emerging community needs, building public awareness and support and integrating student and staff wellbeing initiatives within state-level strategic plans and systems of support. States are also well-positioned to provide guidance and support to school districts on sustainability efforts. State guidance and supports are key to sustaining wellbeing initiatives, given the majority of ESSER funds were allocated to school districts.

This guide is designed to support states in developing and implementing strategies for advancing and sustaining student and staff wellbeing initiatives at the local and state levels. The document provides an overview of five actions necessary for lasting, effective wellbeing initiatives, as well as related considerations and resources. The first three actions — *align policies and practices*, *build and center partnerships* and *consolidate, coordinate and diversify funding sources* — represent an interrelated sequence of steps for advancing and sustaining the work. The last two actions — *communicate strategically* and *continuously learn and improve* — inform each action. Together, these actions offer a framework for states to work from as they consider sustainability beyond the ESSER funding period.



1. **Align Policies and Practices.**
2. **Build and Center Partnerships.**
3. **Consider Other Funding Sources.**
4. **Communicate Strategically.**
5. **Continuously Learn and Improve.**



GETTING STARTED

States can use this guide to consider strategies for advancing and sustaining wellbeing initiatives beyond the ESSER funding period. To begin, state leaders should **convene a team** to determine key activities, needs and goals. The team should include representation from SEA departments and offices that influence wellbeing (e.g., teaching and learning, student supports, accountability, talent development); other child-, youth- and family-serving agencies engaged in wellbeing efforts (e.g., departments of health and human services, behavioral health agencies and community-based organizations); and those impacted by the work (e.g., students, families, educators and school district leaders). This ensures that state initiatives are planned with a wide range of perspectives and expertise at the table, supporting the creation of a common vision as well as opportunities for all partners to plan collective efforts toward achieving that vision. **Clarify roles, responsibilities, authority and scope** early on so that each team member can devote the time needed for meaningful participation.

Once the team is formed, a key first step is to **clarify SEA goals** related to wellbeing so the team has a common understanding of the outcomes and impact the state intends to have in its work toward sustaining student and staff wellbeing initiatives. Next, the team can **inventory existing programs and resources intended** to promote wellbeing. Ideally, this inventory should include information on the purpose of each initiative, how the need was determined, how it aligns with the wellbeing goals and priorities, how progress is being measured, who is involved, the implementation timeline and related funding and policy details. With a shared understanding of goals and existing wellbeing initiatives, state teams can collaborate, identify gaps and combine, refine and adapt efforts to accomplish collaboratively determined objectives.

Below is a table that outlines some key steps for clarifying goals and inventorying existing efforts. While these steps are presented in a list, they do not have to follow a linear path, as individual states may be starting from different entry points.

STEPS FOR CLARIFYING SEA GOALS AND TAKING INVENTORY OF WELLBEING INITIATIVES³

1

REVIEW EXISTING WELLBEING GOALS

Review the SEA's wellbeing vision and compile any existing goals related to student and staff wellbeing, including efforts that influence wellbeing.

2

IDENTIFY WELLBEING INITIATIVES

Generate a list of student and staff wellbeing initiatives and connect each initiative with the state's wellbeing vision and goals.

3

GATHER DATA ABOUT THE INITIATIVES

Gather and organize more detailed information about these initiatives to create an inventory of wellbeing efforts in the state.

4

FAMILIARIZE THE TEAM WITH THE INITIATIVES

Meet to review the collected information for accuracy, learn about the initiatives, identify gaps as well as common trends and begin exploring interrelationships before determining action items.

³ Walrond, N. & Romer, N. (2021). *Serving the whole person: An alignment and coherence guide for state education agencies*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resources/serving-the-whole-person-an-alignment-and-coherence-guide-for-state-education-agencies/>

Advancing and Sustaining Wellbeing Initiatives

FOR EACH OF THE FIVE MAIN ACTIONS, THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS DESCRIBE RELEVANT CONTEXT, THEN PROVIDE SUGGESTED STRATEGIES, QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AND RELATED RESOURCES TO HELP WITH CARRYING OUT THE RESPECTIVE ACTION.

ALIGN POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Wellbeing initiatives are more likely to be sustained when they operate within an aligned and coherent system. **Alignment** refers to all policies, practices, processes and roles in a system working together in similar or consistent ways. **Coherence** refers to integration and interconnection between the parts of the system, in a way that mutually reinforces shared understanding and overall progress toward a clear vision and set of goals.⁴ When each component of the PK-12 system works in tandem, policies, practices and resources become mutually reinforcing and sustaining, enhancing access to services and supports for students and the adults who care for them.⁵

KEY STRATEGIES AND RELATED QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Confirm the SEA's vision. What is the SEA's vision for supporting student and staff wellbeing? How is progress toward the vision monitored?

Align with other initiatives. What wellbeing initiatives are other child- and youth-serving agencies implementing in the state? How are the SEA's efforts aligned with these initiatives?

Identify policy facilitators and barriers. Which existing policies support the SEA in advancing and sustaining wellbeing initiatives? Which ones might create barriers?

Consider opportunities for strengthening alignment and coherence. How are the state's student and staff wellbeing initiatives aligned across goals, funding and policies, strategic communications, community engagement, capacity-building and data use efforts? How might alignment and coherence be improved?⁶

⁴ Walrond & Romer. (2021)

⁵ For more guidance on building alignment and coherence of whole person initiatives, see <https://www.wested.org/resources/serving-the-whole-person-an-alignment-and-coherence-guide-for-state-education-agencies/>

⁶ Walrond & Romer. (2021)

RESOURCES FOR ALIGNING POLICIES AND PRACTICES



Serving the Whole Person: An Alignment and Coherence Guide for State Education Agencies — WestEd

This guide offers state teams a practical process for reviewing their whole-person initiatives through a continuous improvement lens. The guide includes five chapters with step-by-step directives regarding how a team can accomplish improved alignment and coherence through a series of technical and adaptive tasks, such as establishing a shared vision and theory of change, taking inventory of whole-person initiatives, monitoring progress and creating an action plan.



Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems: A Guide for State Education Agencies — CCSO

This resource provides guidance for SEA teams on the core features of a comprehensive school mental health system (CSMHS) and outlines how states can support establishing CSMHS through five key steps. The guide also highlights state examples for advancing CSMHS.



Integrating Social & Emotional Learning Within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports to Advance Equity: SEL MTSS Toolkit for State & District Leaders — CCSO, CASEL, AIR

This toolkit is designed to support policymakers and leaders in other states as well as district leaders who are interested in engaging in the work of intentional social and emotional learning (SEL) and multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) integration. The toolkit addresses five key questions to support state and district leaders in advancing equitable, integrated SEL and MTSS.



Reimagining Excellence: A blueprint for integrating social and emotional well-being and academic excellence in schools — The Region 13 Comprehensive Center Network and the Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety, WestEd

This blueprint — designed with input from in-person and remote educators, leaders, researchers, professional learning providers and technical assistance providers — strives to detail the indicators of learning programs that successfully integrate equity, wellbeing and academics.



Leveraging the Moment to Advance Student and Staff Wellbeing and Connection — CCSO

This brief describes how states are implementing key conditions for ensuring alignment and coherence when integrating student social, emotional and academic development within an MTSS framework. The brief also captures insights on how states are leveraging relief funding to further student and staff wellbeing.



BUILD AND CENTER PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships — including partnerships with students, families, educators, system leaders, community-based organizations and other child- and youth-serving agencies — are essential to effective and relevant decision-making related to state priorities, support systems, policies and funding. These partnerships contribute valuable insight, expertise and social networks that can help inform initiative design, build public support and sustain implementation. Accordingly, states should implement strategies for partnering with those who are directly impacted by wellbeing initiatives to design and continuously improve these efforts. Partnerships also build a culture of trust and shared accountability, which are fundamental to sustaining any change effort. Above all, school districts are key to building and centering community partnerships that can help advance and sustain wellbeing initiatives at the local level, so states should consider how to best support and learn from district partnership efforts.

KEY STRATEGIES AND RELATED QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Assess community assets and needs. How are SEA leaders learning about community assets and needs related to wellbeing? How does the SEA understand its role in protecting and respecting those assets, rather than extracting from them? Who can partner with the SEA to improve leaders' understanding?

Practice collaborative decision-making. How do SEA leaders currently partner with young people, families, community-based organizations and other agencies to identify state priorities for student and staff wellbeing? How does the SEA include individuals and groups whose experiences have been historically and/or currently excluded? What opportunities can be created for more inclusive, collaborative decision-making for continuous improvement grounded in community needs and experiences? What can be learned from shared decision-making practices implemented by school districts?

Understand and communicate outcomes. How is the SEA monitoring and learning about the impact of wellbeing initiatives? Who can help effectively monitor, capture and disseminate what is learned? How might the SEA partner with LEAs to understand impact? Who has decided what positive impact looks like and how it is measured? How does the SEA work with partners to amplify positive impact and address negative impact? How is the SEA communicating what is learned and who is being communicating to/with? How is this information being used to make collaborative decisions about wellbeing approaches and investments?

Strengthen and grow partnerships. Which organizations and agencies currently partner with the SEA on wellbeing initiatives? What is the quality of their relationships to the communities served? What is working and what could be better about these partnerships as the SEA seeks to advance and sustain student and staff wellbeing initiatives? Which partners might be missing?

RESOURCES FOR BUILDING AND CENTERING PARTNERSHIPS



[Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement](#) — The Carnegie Corporation of New York

This resource discusses essential conditions and policy and program recommendations for more transformative family-school partnerships that can help improve student learning experiences and outcomes. This framework can be helpful for state agencies as they consider how to support local educational agencies to partner with families in advancing wellbeing initiatives.



[School-Community Partnerships: Solutions for Educational Equity Through Social and Emotional Well-Being](#) — MDRC

This brief provides an overview of research behind school-community partnerships and provides examples at the program, staffing and policy levels of implementation. This resource also describes how these partnerships can build equitable learning environments that meet all students' social and emotional needs. This is a helpful resource for state agencies as they consider how to support local educational agencies to partner with community organizations to advance and sustain student and staff wellbeing efforts.



[States Partnering with Educational Service Agencies to Increase Capacity, Coherence, and Equity](#) — CCSSO

This guide outlines avenues and examples for utilizing Educational Service Agencies to build SEA capacity and provide LEAs, districts and schools with the services and supports they need.



[Building Authentic School-Family Partnerships Through the Lens of Social and Emotional Learning](#) — CASEL

This blueprint — designed with input from in-person and remote educators, leaders, researchers, professional learning providers and technical assistance providers — strives to detail the indicators of learning programs that successfully integrate equity, wellbeing and academics.



CONSIDER OTHER FUNDING SOURCES

Many U.S. Department of Education (ED) and other federal grant programs can support student and staff wellbeing initiatives, but spending options are sometimes misunderstood. States can support local leaders by developing guidance with examples of activities that LEAs can support through federal funds, such as using Title I or Title IV funds for school counselors, Title II to train school staff on recognizing mental health needs and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for supports for students with disabilities.

SEAs can also take steps to ensure their grant systems permit LEAs to make full use of all funding options. For example, in the context of using Title I for school counselors, the SEA can make sure that the SEA's local-to-state application for ED funding and SEA monitoring tools are consistent with this being an allowable use of funds.

States can also support LEAs by highlighting opportunities to coordinate funds by using different funding sources to support different parts of an initiative. Often called braiding, this kind of coordination can be difficult for LEAs to navigate in light of the complex regulations that govern federal funds and misunderstandings about these regulations. State education agencies can provide guidance and support that help LEAs coordinate funds to align with local needs and maximize the reach and impact of wellbeing initiatives. For example, an LEA could potentially use a combination of IDEA, Title I and other funding sources to provide targeted support to a range of student groups.

KEY STRATEGIES AND RELATED QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Emphasize wellbeing-related activities in spending guidance. What guidance has the state provided to its LEAs about allowable uses of federal funds and do they include wellbeing-related activities?

Identify funding sources with the potential to sustain ESSER initiatives. What wellbeing-related activities are LEAs supporting with ESSER funds and how might they be supported with other ED grants?

Review state systems to maximize local spending. Do the state systems for managing federal programs (such as application, monitoring and payment systems) support spending on wellbeing-related initiatives? Do they support coordinated planning and spending across funding sources?

RESOURCES FOR CONSIDERING OTHER FUNDING SOURCES



[Federal Funding Streams and Strategies to Improve Conditions for Learning: A Resource Guide for States — CCSSO](#)

This guide is designed to support states by outlining the federal funding sources that can be accessed (and often coordinated or combined) to support efforts to improve the conditions for learning and to identify strategies that state leaders might pursue as they begin to enter into partnerships to improve conditions for learning.



[State Funding for Student Mental Health — The Education Commission of the States](#)

This policy brief explores and describes common sources of funding that states use to support K-12 school-based mental health programming. It includes a 50-state scan that displays how each state funds student mental health services.



[Understanding School Medicaid: A Primer for Chief State School Officers — The Healthy Schools Campaign and CCSSO](#)

This resource explores what Medicaid is, what it covers — in and out of school — and new opportunities for expanding school Medicaid programs statewide.



[RESTART & RECOVERY: Leveraging Federal COVID Relief Funding & Medicaid to Support Student & Staff Wellbeing & Connection — The National Center for School Mental Health, the Healthy Schools Campaign and CCSSO](#)

This resource offers useful guidance regarding blending and braiding of ESSER, Medicaid and other funding sources to develop sustainable programs and staffing that support student and staff wellbeing. This guide also offers multiple case studies, implementation strategies, toolkits, contact lists and policy maps.



Social and Emotional Learning Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review — The RAND Corporation

This report discusses the opportunities for supporting SEL under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the standards of evidence under ESSA and SEL interventions that should be eligible for federal funds through ESSA. Federal, state and district education policymakers can use this report to identify relevant, evidence-based SEL interventions that meet their local needs.



COMMUNICATE STRATEGICALLY

A well-developed communications plan can help build support for programs, new legislation, policy development and budgetary decisions that advance student and staff wellbeing initiatives. In developing a strategic communications approach, it is important to clarify the SEA's goals and tailor messaging to those who are impacted by these goals. It is also important to build a statewide definition of wellbeing so community partners and system leaders have a common understanding about student and staff wellbeing. Further, state agencies can build support for wellbeing efforts through bidirectional strategic communication with students, families, educators, system leaders and policymakers about why and how these initiatives are fundamental to improved student mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, academic success and educator retention, among other goals. The communications strategy should also support efforts to build awareness of wellbeing initiatives at the local level so all members of a community can understand and meaningfully contribute to the implementation of wellbeing initiatives in their communities.⁷ Finally, states should establish consistent opportunities for receiving feedback from those directly impacted by wellbeing initiatives and communicate broadly about what is learned from this feedback and how it is applied.

⁷ Canavero, S., & Buckner, L. (2021). *Aligned and Coherent Communications to Serve the Whole Person: A Workbook for Strengthening State Education Agencies' Strategic Communications*. WestEd. <https://selcenter.wested.org/resource/aligned-and-coherent-communications/>

KEY STRATEGIES AND RELATED QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Clarify the why. Why is the SEA prioritizing student and staff wellbeing? What challenge is the state trying to address?

Determine the audience. Who are the most important people to reach and why? Who does the SEA need to reach within the agency and externally with partners?

Craft the message. What do the audiences need to do, know or believe about student and staff wellbeing?

Design outreach methods. What are the best ways to reach these different audiences?

Identify resources and support. What resources are needed to support strategic communications? What internal capacity exists within the SEA? How might the SEA work with partners to supplement communications efforts?

Communicate impact. What evidence of impact for wellbeing initiatives exists, how has it been shared and with whom? What evidence would be compelling to different audiences? Who else should be consulted about the impact of wellbeing initiatives in the state? What data or stories might be gathered and how might they be shared? What existing research or frameworks might help build awareness of the connection between student and staff wellbeing and student academic success?

RESOURCES FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS



[How Learning Happens Messaging Framework: A Tool for Communicating about Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning](#) — America's Promise Alliance

This guide provides a messaging framework for communicating about social, emotional and cognitive learning. It is designed to help system leaders build a coherent narrative and align efforts toward a common purpose.



[Aligned and Coherent Communications to Serve the Whole Person: A Workbook for Strengthening State Education Agencies' Strategic Communications](#) — The Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety, WestEd

This strategic communications workbook is designed to be used by SEA leaders to aid in the design and launch of their strategic communications efforts for serving the whole person.



CONTINUOUSLY LEARN AND IMPROVE

Throughout these stages, state teams should continuously improve their efforts based on ongoing learning about anticipated and actual impact of wellbeing initiatives. Feedback loops from the school, district and regional levels allow state leaders to identify and adapt to implementation barriers and successes early on, which, in turn, creates more aligned, effective systems at the classroom, school and district levels.⁸ A continuous improvement approach requires that state agencies implement incremental change efforts and scale those efforts over time based on ongoing learning about how students, families and staff experience these changes. With this in mind, states should develop routines for ongoing data collection, analysis and sense-making — including quantitative, qualitative and experiential data — to continuously assess and strengthen conditions for student and staff wellbeing, all done in authentic partnership with young people, families and communities. Evidence of impact and meaningful change gleaned from continuous improvement efforts may also help build support for future wellbeing investments.

KEY STRATEGIES AND RELATED QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Compose the team to advance equity. Who is included on the team to advance and sustain wellbeing initiatives? Do they reflect the experiences of those closest to the work — young people and the adults who care for them?

⁸ National Implementation Research Network (2008). *Policy Feedback Loops*. Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. University of North Carolina. <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/module-5/topic-3-practice-policy-feedback-loops>

Look to existing data sources. What quantitative, qualitative and/or experiential data can help the team better understand the need for wellbeing investments and the impact of existing wellbeing initiatives (e.g., statewide indicator data, school climate surveys, insights from ESSER consultation efforts, etc.)?

Implement feedback loops. How does the SEA gather feedback about wellbeing initiatives throughout the implementation cycle? Who offers this feedback? Who else should be consulted about the impact of wellbeing efforts?

Establish measures. What new or existing measures might help the SEA understand its impact and opportunities for improvement?

Institute learning routines. What are the SEA's routines for learning and making improvements? How do SEA staff regularly adapt programs, policies and practices based on new insights?

RESOURCES FOR CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND IMPROVEMENT



[CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems — CCSSO](#)

This resource includes a set of principles to inform how states design effective systems to improve low-performing schools and provide an equitable education for all students.



[Practice–Policy Feedback Loops — The National Implementation Research Network](#)

This resource describes the crucial role that feedback loops play in effective implementation cycles, specifically how feedback from the practice level should inform educational leaders' efforts to develop aligned and effective educational policy, procedures and resources.



[Investing in Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning: Companion Guide to Social and Emotional Learning Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review — The RAND Corporation](#)

This report offers guidance to SEAs and LEAs on assessing local SEL needs and using these assessment results to integrate SEL into school practices and improvement efforts and to allocate resources to support school-based SEL interventions. The report also offers information on implementing, monitoring and evaluating selected SEL interventions.



[Whole Child Policy Toolkit — The Learning Policy Institute](#)

This toolkit offers strategies, tools and resources to advance whole child policy and systems change.



[School Climate IMPROVEMENT Resource Package — The National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments](#)

This resource includes a set of guides, tools and modules to support education system leaders in improving school climate.



CONCLUSION

State leaders play a critical role in advancing and sustaining efforts that promote student and staff wellbeing. The five actions outlined within this guide can be used to support both existing and new initiatives by offering a framework to strategically align efforts, diversify funding sources, engage in meaningful partnership with communities to determine wellbeing priorities, communicate about those priorities and continuously improve wellbeing policies and practices through ongoing learning. Grounding sustainability efforts in these five actions can help SEAs and LEAs address growing inequities and support the wellbeing of students and staff for years to come.