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## ARTICLE

# Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) State Policy & STEM Education: Examining Equity & Investigating Implementation

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Policy plays an essential role in enabling conditions for communities to implement STEM education that drives equitable outcomes and supports every students' social-emotional and academic development. However, all too often, the policies created to ameliorate inequitable learning conditions perpetuate prejudiced perceptions and discourse while negatively shaping the experiences of Black children. Recognizing this disconnect, we chose Transformative Social-Emotional Learning (TSEL), a theoretical framework anchored in the idea of justice-oriented citizenship to build educational equity, to craft a study that sought to answer the question, *"To what extent do states implement education policy that supports Black student social-emotional learning and drive district level implementation toward equitable STEM education?"*

For this three-year, National Science Foundation-funded project, we chose a qualitative methodology to examine state social-emotional learning (SEL) P-12 education policy, how it fosters or stifles notions of equity, and the coupling of equity-based SEL into STEM curriculum to shape Black students' STEM experiences. In Phase I of our study we carried out a policy scan of all 50 states. To do so, we developed a rubric to evaluate state policies. The policy scan rubric was comprised of 11 categories used to evaluate the policies enacted by the various states. The categories themselves were derived from the literature around SEL and TSEL. A color coding scheme was included as part of the evaluation criteria. The color coding scheme consisted of green, yellow, and red which were indicative of a state's degree of implementation of each of the rubric's 11 categories. For each of the 50 states, an evaluation was made for each of the 11 categories to assess whether the state does not require the evaluation category (Red), whether the state requires the category but there's no state level guidance on how to achieve it (Yellow), or whether the state requires the evaluative category and provides guidance for how to achieve it (Green).

Preliminary state policy scans (40% complete) demonstrated that some states have indeed established meaningful SEL/TSEL policies for their states while other states have resisted such efforts. For example, Oregon stood out as a state with one of the most meaningful state level SEL/TSEL policy implementations with 10 out of the 11 categories receiving a green evaluation (requires SEL/TSEL and provides guidance). Categories where Oregon stood out included providing evidence-based guidance for the integration of SEL standards into academic practices, creating a framework ensuring that curriculum is authentic, truthful, and culturally representative, and requiring the collection and use of disaggregated data related to SEL/TSEL. In contrast to Oregon, Arizona stood out in its numerous evaluations of red (no SEL/TSEL requirements or guidelines) in 8 of the 11 evaluative categories. One example of Arizona's antagonism toward SEL/TSEL policy was found on the state's

department of education website where they describe SEL as a “Trojan horse” for the introduction of Critical Race Theory as well as proclaiming that it is “wrong” to incorporate SEL into a school’s curriculum (Arizona Department of Education, [n.d.](#)). State-level scans will continue until completion in September 2023.

After the completion of the scans for all 50 states, the project will move into Phase II, district-level policy scans. During Phase Two of the study, the SEL policy of pre-identified districts will undergo the same scanning process described in Phase I. As with the state-level policy scans, the evaluation rubric will be used to provide an a priori coding framework for use during the district-level scans. Phase II will also see the introduction of interviews into our study. Semi-structured interview data will be collected from state and district-level stakeholders in selected states and a thematic analysis will be completed to derive the major themes around SEL/TSEL policy emanating from such vital stakeholders.

In the final phase of our study, findings from Phases I and II will be used to illuminate crucial insights into SEL/TSEL policy and STEM education. This is a critical step toward identifying misalignments between states and local communities. From these insights, we will create policy recommendations aligned with TSEL and STEM education to continue to push for equity in social-emotional policy that does not sacrifice STEM education but leverages TSEL to enhance student experiences in STEM.

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## References

Arizona Department of Education. (n.d.). *Critical Race Theory and Social Emotional Learning Explained*. <https://www.azed.gov/adeinfo/critical-race-theory-and-social-emotional-learning-explained>