

Centering Wellbeing

Advancing Social Emotional Learning for All

by Christina A. Russell, Policy Studies Associates

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Introduction

The Working Group on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Learning Differences was launched in 2021 as an initiative of the Global Cities Education Network (GCEN) in partnership with Digital Promise Global¹. Fourteen school districts, a mix of GCEN and League of Innovative Schools members, were initially selected. Each district had a unique problem of practice that they aimed to explore and address throughout their participation. To address their problems of practice, district leaders each developed and worked to implement an action plan designed to strengthen SEL supports in their district, including for students with learning differences. In these plans, districts drew on expertise and resources shared in the working group and adapted the strategies shared.

From January 2021 through November 2022, the working group offered a platform for participating districts to learn from school leaders and educators, from researchers and policymakers, from community leaders, and from each other. The learning centered on deep dives into two international school systems: a virtual site visit to Surrey Schools (British Columbia, Canada) and an in-person convening in Melbourne (Victoria, Australia). The weeklong Melbourne convening was designed to engage the SEL and Learning Differences Working Group as well as districts comprising a separate Equitable School Systems Transformation Working Group convened by Digital Promise.

Policy Studies Associates was engaged as the research partner to document lessons learned through the SEL and Learning Differences Working Group. This report is grounded in the reflections of working group members, collected through a survey administered by Policy Studies Associates in December 2022 to all participants in the Melbourne convening (23 responses, including from each of the nine working group districts that traveled to Melbourne), and follow-up interviews with leaders from four working group member districts in February 2023. This report is organized into three sections:

- **Taking Action on SEL:** This section highlights policy and practice changes influenced by participation in the working group.
- **District Readiness Factors:** This section unpacks key factors that contributed to the capacity of districts to implement the new strategies and ideas gained through working group participation.
- **Connections and Confirmations:** This section summarizes perceptions of the ways in which the working group was beneficial for participants in creating a trusted network of colleagues.

Districts in SEL Working Group

El Segundo Unified School District (California) • Fayette County Public Schools (Kentucky) • Hangzhou (China) • Lakota Local School District (Ohio) • Lynwood Unified School District (California) • Mineola Public Schools (New York) • Owsley County School District (Kentucky) • Pajaro Valley Unified School District (California) • Reynoldsburg City Schools (Ohio) • Richland School District Two (South Carolina) • Suffern Central School District (New York) • Surrey Public Schools (British Columbia) • Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind • Victoria Department of Education (Australia)

¹ On July 1, 2022, Digital Promise Global acquired the Global Cities Education Network and the associated working groups from Asia Society. These initiatives continue to thrive at Digital Promise.

Taking Action on SEL

The Working Group on SEL and Learning Differences launched during a time of significant disruptions in school districts resulting from COVID-19. Yet despite this disruption—or perhaps accelerated by the urgent needs around mental health and wellness that surfaced in school communities—each of the participating districts reported taking concrete steps toward implementing systemic changes inspired by strategies, resources, and tools shared in the working group. By early winter 2023, multiple working group districts reported that they had implemented the following:

“Through the resources and Victoria SEL curriculum, we have developed new ideas for supporting our educators as they strive to incorporate SEL cross-curricularly. We also found the material and information beneficial in our efforts of sharing [...] the interconnected systems and the importance of SEL, wellbeing, and equity work.”

—Fayette County Public Schools leader

- **Shifted language from SEL to wellbeing,** reflecting the terminology and perspectives of educators from Victoria, Australia. According to a Fayette County Public Schools leader, “One of the things [we] walked away with from day one in Melbourne schools was how much we loved the verbiage around wellness, rather than it being broken down into pieces like mental health and SEL and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Just wellness. [...] It’s very early in the making, but it’s been nice to have people responsive to that shift in language.”
- **Gained knowledge about responsive strategies for addressing learning differences.** A leader from Mineola Public Schools commented that the district is considering ways to incorporate the resources available through the Learner Variability Project, presented by Digital Promise at the Melbourne convening. Mineola included the [Learner Variability Project](#) as a resource in its asynchronous professional development for teachers and is exploring strategies for additional supports for adoption in classrooms and in the district’s Response to Intervention/Instructional Support Teams (RTI/IST) process. Richland School District Two is intentionally aligning its tiered intervention processes with SEL: the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Behavior Intervention Specialists are implementing a district initiative to have a Social Emotional Wellbeing (SEW) Lead in each district school by the 2023-24 school year.
- **Embraced new strategies to address the SEL needs of staff,** leveraging learnings about the importance of staff wellbeing throughout the two years of the working group. For example, the superintendent in Pajaro Valley Unified School District received approval to implement the [PeopleBench Workforce Resilience Tracker](#), which will offer an additional lens on ways in which the district can support staff wellness. The district will develop an action plan addressing the elements of resilience where the data indicate staff struggle the most: “There is urgency around the need to support staff and support their wellness.” Several districts have also adopted SEL Leads for each school, a strategy that was centered in the virtual site visits to Surrey Schools.

- **Strengthened understanding of the intersections between SEL and equity.** Following the Melbourne convening, which addressed issues of both equity and SEL, leaders from Surrey Schools reported that they planned to increase professional development opportunities that would, for example, support educators in better understanding how “culturally responsive and anti-racist practices enhance equity, student voice, and agency” and how their own identity and social, emotional, and cultural competencies “impact their relationships with students, their curricular choices, and assessment of learning.” Leaders in Lynwood Unified School District reported plans to adopt “more inclusive curriculums that include indigenous voices” and “to be more aggressive with our work around SEL.”

Bolstered by learnings from both Surrey Schools and Melbourne, the El Segundo superintendent feels “more equipped as a leader to participate in those [tough] conversations. [...] It just really gave me more strength to feel empowered to say, “Race is part of someone’s identity. And if [we are true to] our mantra, which is to have all our students feel seen, heard, supported, and loved, then race is part of that. We need to support our teachers to have these conversations and to feel like they can work through this together. I feel as if indirectly I benefited from the cultural work and traditions that they brought forward from Surrey, and then certainly from Australia in the Aboriginal cultural piece that was introduced.”

Case Study

Implementing Intentional SEL Instruction for Deaf Students in the Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind

Dr. Michelle Tanner, associate superintendent of the deaf at Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind, brought a unique perspective on the connection between learning differences and SEL to the working group. She reflected that 90 percent of students who are deaf and hard of hearing are born to hearing parents and estimates that only 25 percent of those parents will learn to sign well enough to communicate in a deep, meaningful manner with their child. In her experience, “That can cause a lot of problems. Behavior problems are a function of the hearing loss because they can’t communicate.”

Dr. Tanner believes that SEL instruction can help students feel supported and effectively express themselves, leading to intentionality in her efforts to identify curriculum and resources that would be appropriate—and could be adapted—for the needs of deaf students in Utah. The [Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships](#) curriculum, developed through the State of Victoria and shared during the Melbourne convening, offered new, flexible practices that could be adapted to meet the specific needs of her students, in conjunction with other curricula already in use, including [Second Step](#).

Since returning from the working group convening, she has personally been using *Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships* in direct instruction with students, as well as training school directors to use the resource to address the most pressing needs in their schools. According to Dr. Tanner, “I’ve told them, ‘I want you to address the topics that most are relevant to your students and what you’re seeing [in your students and classrooms].’ [Those topics] could span the gamut.”

“[With deaf students], you must be much more intentional and direct in teaching the SEL skills. [...] You have to be more intentional about what you’re saying and doing and why you’re doing it and practicing it.”

—Dr. Michelle Tanner, Associate Superintendent of the Deaf, Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind

Case Study

Funding for Wellness Centers in El Segundo Unified School District

District leaders in El Segundo Unified School District observed a significant uptick in the mental health needs across the school community in January 2023. Counseling referrals had increased five-fold over previous months, according to the superintendent, Dr. Melissa Moore. Data from the district's [Panorama](#) survey indicated that students were feeling stressed and anxious.

A couple of months prior, during the Working Group on SEL and Learning Differences convening in Melbourne, Australia, Superintendent Moore and Marisa Janicek, assistant superintendent for educational services, visited a high school where the first stop on the student-led tour was the wellness center. According to Dr. Moore, "That really had an impact on me. [The student] lit up when she got in the wellness center. [...]"

During the visit, the Assistant Superintendent noticed the following:

"[The Wellness Center] was a normal place to go, and it didn't have judgment on it. It wasn't like you're unwell; it was a place where you can relax and feel better. And it seemed a part of the culture, that it's normal to have a wellness center and to be supported when you're having a bad day or if something is terribly wrong. [...] Everybody wants to be healthy. Everybody wants to feel a part of something rather than a label of something that was wrong."

Grounded in these observations locally and in Melbourne, Dr. Moore recommended instituting a middle and high school wellness center to the Board of Education. And, in February 2023, the board authorized funding for the 2023-24 school year for a middle school wellness center staffed by a counselor and a high school wellness center staffed by a school psychologist.

This funding will bring essential new supports to the students in El Segundo, including those who might have otherwise not qualified for mental health services. Without this funding, as in many districts, "We're only able to triage the most [urgent needs] and not students that just need regular check-ins." The funding will also bring new staff roles for the district, alleviating the burden on the school psychologist who is typically focused on special education testing and supports and of school counselors who already, "have a full plate of continuing to help students navigate the academic path forward as well as navigate moving forward into college or career."

As the district moves toward designing and implementing these new wellness centers, leaders are intentionally soliciting input on priorities from a broad-based group of stakeholders, including principals, students, teachers, and counselors, through focus groups and surveys. According to the superintendent, "Now that we have the funding allocated, I'm really looking to them to bring forward their input and their stakeholder involvement in collaboration to really launch this. Their leadership is really important in that."

"I am very, very pleased to have secured this funding and to have had the support of our Board recognizing wellness as an important need."

—Dr. Melissa Moore, Superintendent,
El Segundo Unified School District

Case Study

Shifts in Language and Practice in Suffern Central School District

Suffern Central School District in New York had a strong foundational commitment to SEL prior to engagement in the working group. For example, prior to COVID-19, the district had adopted the RULER framework from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. But, “coming back from COVID, it was very hard to pick up where we left off with all the other things on our plates,” according to Sarah Kern, the inaugural director of school counseling and social emotional wellness in Suffern Central School District.

Participating in the Melbourne convening of the SEL workgroup, Kern was struck by how small shifts in practice and in language can have a big impact. As a result, she has shifted to emphasize the language of wellbeing rather than the sometimes politically charged language of SEL: “I’ve said this a lot this year: ‘We’re trying to make sure everybody’s okay.’ Let’s just be people and talk like people. When [people] hear SEL, [they] just think it’s jargon. ‘Oh, it’s just something that the state says we have to do.’ I’m not doing it because the state says we have to do it.”

In addition, as director of social emotional wellness, Kern is working toward shifting mindsets to promote the concept that wellbeing is an important goal of education:

“Australia has two goals. One is to graduate college and career-ready people who are ready to be full economic members of society and educated. But they also have a goal to graduate people that have a sense of wellbeing. And we’ve already started to incorporate that: ‘These are our district goals. We want to graduate college and career-ready [people] who also have a sense of wellbeing, who are happy with who they are in their space in the world.’ And in 20 years, nobody’s ever said that out loud. And now we say it all the time.”

Finally, Kern was motivated by insights about the ways in which embedding small moments throughout the school day can have a big impact on students. For example, a panelist from [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#) suggested that one thing a math teacher can do every day for 45 seconds is to poll the class and have them give a word about how they felt about the lesson. “Even if you don’t do anything with that, what are you doing in that moment? You’re recognizing that kids have feelings. The teacher is acknowledging that she or he is interested in learning the kids’ feelings. [...] And the research shows if a teacher does that literally every day, in a month those kids are going to feel like they’re connected to that teacher, and then those kids are going to do better in school. It’s just a win-win.”

“What is the takeaway we got from Australia? SEL has to be real. It has to be sincere. It has to be authentic, and it can’t be in addition to other things that people are doing.”

—Sarah Kern, Director of School Counseling and Social Emotional Wellness, Suffern Central School District

The district is taking concrete steps to support these shifts in mindsets and language. For instance, Kern is meeting with all the Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) to introduce wellbeing and “talk about how it’s just as important that kids are happy and healthy.” The district is reframing its vision statement and plans to explicitly integrate wellbeing. A spring 2023 community event will emphasize wellbeing and the importance of finding interests and passions outside of core academics. And Kern will work with academic teachers to set an expectation that 90 seconds of each course will include a teachers’ check-in with their students. “We can do the 90 seconds a day in five academic subject areas. So then kids would get almost 10 minutes of [intentional focus on] wellbeing every single day.”

Case Study

Investing in Adult Wellness in Fayette County Public Schools

For the Student Support Services team in Fayette County Public Schools, the Working Group on SEL and Learning Differences highlighted the importance of addressing the wellness of school staff. As a result, the district has made strategic investments of resources and time to support and coach staff.

“If adults aren’t well, kids aren’t well.”

**—Raine Minichan, Associate Director
of Student Support Services, Fayette
County Public Schools**

The district has hired a social/emotional wellness support specialist for employees, who is an experienced clinician and counselor, with a proposal to expand this district-level staff wellness team in future years. In addition, each school has designated a staff wellness lead—supported with a stipend funded with the district’s Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) dollars—who works with a committee to survey school staff “to really get a better picture of what schools need and what staff need, while also respecting that every school is very different.”

The district has also invested in developing and supporting SEL Leads in each school, drawing on the experiences and successes shared by Surrey Schools during the working group. The SEL Lead serves as a trainer and resource to staff in each school, and the Student Support Services team has submitted a proposal to the district to offer a stipend or supplemental pay to all the SEL Leads. Tricia Groves, the district’s social emotional learning coordinator, works with each of these Leads and is implementing a Professional Learning Community (PLC) that meets three times a year for SEL Leads to connect and learn collectively. She noted that the team also hopes to have increased funding to have PLC meetings “once a month, because we have to show that we are putting in the work and the time” to demonstrate the importance of the work. These PLCs are an opportunity to practice tangible skills and strategies that can translate to instructional practice.

For example, in the January 2023 PLC meeting, the team engaged in activities directly modeled after professional development experiences from the Melbourne convenings. Groves explained the following:

“We talked about the impact and the power of having the meetings held in a circle. So, we hold our PLC meetings in a circle; we talk about why this is important: It puts everybody on a level playing field. Even when we do it with our students, it puts them on the same level as the teacher. No one stands out. We are all equal.”

Some school administrators are now beginning their faculty meetings with a circle because they saw the power of the approach; a future goal is to incorporate circles in district leadership monthly meetings.

In the PLC, the team also shared activities and resources that SEL Leads can incorporate into their work, including activities from the [Resilience, Rights & Respectful Relationships](#) learning materials published by the Victoria Department of Education and Training. For example, Raine Minichan, the associate director of student support services, explained, “We did the chopstick activity [which focuses on partnership skills and strengths] with our participants, and we talked about how they could then do that with their teachers at a staff meeting or their students and their groups.”

District Readiness Factors

As summarized in the previous sections, several districts participating in the Working Group on SEL and Learning Differences enacted systemic efforts and investments to advance wellbeing among both students and staff, as well as to implement new instructional strategies. This section summarizes three common factors that helped to accelerate district readiness to turnkey the ideas from the Working Group.

1. Ensuring that the Working Group Aligns to Leadership Priorities and Commitments

Moving from idea to action requires commitment, effort, and—almost always—dedicated time and financial resources. All participants in the Melbourne convening agreed or strongly agreed that they benefited from participation in the Melbourne convening and gained new ideas for their work.

Further, Working Group participants reported that they were putting those ideas into action. In survey responses less than two months after the Melbourne convening, 82 percent of leaders reported that the district was planning to make concrete changes informed by their participation, and 66 percent reported the district had *already* implemented changes. A Fayette County Public Schools leader explained, “We have the support of our superintendent and department chief. The resource of time is most needed: time to plan quality materials, professional development sessions, professional learning communities, and time to train school leaders.”

“We are intent on supporting our leaders and educators. In order to improve and increase our learning environment capacity, we must continue to refine and expand our resources. These resources include innovative ideas and strategies to promote and sustain healthy social-emotional wellness.”

—Lynwood Unified School District Leader

As districts in the Working Group on SEL and Learning Differences reflected on their learning and work, it was clear that success in bringing changes to district policy and practice stemmed from the strategic alignment between the focus of the working group and commitments of district leadership. Here are some examples:

- Dr. Tanner, the associate superintendent for the deaf for the Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind, intentionally joined the Working Group with an aim to expand the range of SEL resources and curricula that could be adapted to support deaf students in her schools. She explained, “To learn about a topic, to get better at a topic, I take advantage of all the opportunities that I have. [I learn from] different learning settings and environments. So, that was one of the things that was very appealing to me about this [working group] opportunity to learn from another country. That’s fascinating to me.”

- Dr. Moore in El Segundo Unified, who successfully made the case for district funding for a wellness center, reflected, “These are some big decisions. I think that we’ve been fortunate to be able to move more quickly because we keep building on the things that we’re doing and deepening. We don’t keep throwing more fruit in the basket. We are keeping what we have and yet deepening and building on it and always looking for the next best step that’s very thoughtful and purposeful.”
- The focus on wellbeing in Suffern Central School District, according to Director of School Counseling and Social Emotional Wellness Sarah Kern is “part of our superintendent’s vision as a leader. His vision is, ‘School is more than just the academics and the awards.’”

2. **Intentionally Engaging Both Decision Makers and Implementors in the Working Group**

Districts are able to more easily translate the lessons learned in a working group to action and practice in their district when leaders with authority for both decision-making and for implementation are engaged in the learning experiences. Seventy percent of survey respondents across all participating districts strongly agreed that they were able to collaborate with their district colleagues during the Melbourne convening; another 26 percent agreed with this statement. Here are some examples:

- In Suffern, Kern reflected that, “I couldn’t imagine [the superintendent] there without me, and I couldn’t imagine being there without him. Because he heard [the ideas] directly. We didn’t have to discuss it. I didn’t need to plead the case or anything like that. He was like, ‘Yes, do that.’ So that was helpful.”
- In El Segundo, the superintendent noted that the clarity in roles enabled the district to quickly bring back ideas from the working group to enact change in the system. “We have clarity in our roles. I see [the strategy], and [the associate superintendent] sees it, and we’re like, ‘We need to do this. We need to bring this back.’ I know what my role is. My role is to get the board to say yes and to fund it, right? I’m not going to be the micromanager. I’m going to let [the associate] work with them on the program, I’m going to have the HR person work, the budget person work.... I trust them to deliver something that’s going to be a high-quality product.”

Leaders from other districts responding to the survey echoed these comments about the importance of having the “right” mix of leaders participate in a working group and convening. For instance, one noted, “We are the decision makers who can make the material come to life in our district.” Another reflected that convening participants “are the people that can make decisions and policy changes in their organizations.”

3. Balancing Educator Empowerment with District Curation of Resources

Working Group participants acknowledge the essential role of central district supports in offering school leaders and teachers easy access to curated materials that enable them to advance SEL in their schools, while allowing flexibility to be responsive to student priorities and needs. Several district convening participants have created resource libraries that allow educators to tailor to the needs of their students. Here are some examples:

- In Fayette County, the Student Support Services team is creating folders of resources and activities, organized by the SEL categories on the [DESSA assessment](#) used by the district. The goal is that “next year, we will have this whole bank of resources that teachers can pull once they identify, hey, based on these assessments, our kids need a little more this or that,” according to the associate director of student support services.
- In Suffern, the director of school counseling and social emotional wellness reflected that her responsibility as district leader is “to educate our staff about how important [wellbeing] is and prove to them how important. That falls on me.... I think way too much we rely on teachers to have to read through a bunch of stuff and pick what they think works for them.... I really think more needs to be handed to them on a silver platter already done.”
- With the support of the school-based SEL Leads, El Segundo has made wellbeing a component of onboarding for all new staff so that they are encouraged to “think about wellness and their wellbeing as part of their journey as an educator and their ability to teach and deliver instruction and be someone as a role model to students.... I’ve been very excited to see the SEL Leads being willing to be vulnerable and get up in front of their peers and talk about this topic of emotions and wellbeing,” according to the superintendent. The district also provides teacher access to professional development resources at their own pace. The associate superintendent for educational services explained, “Teachers can go get the resources when they’re ready. They may have something else on their priority list right now, but they can have access to it even on the weekends if they want to. They may have a class that’s having a hard time, and they can go in there and see how you can talk about emotions and how they matter.”

“We know our teachers are struggling, and we are really trying to work to be able to provide them with these resources and activities to help them in their day-to-day, so they don’t have to go out and try to look for it.... I don’t expect them to follow it with fidelity by the book. If they have something better to teach empathy, go for it. But we want to be able to provide them with those resources.... We always like to give them takeaways and strategies that they can immediately take and put into their classroom.”

—Tricia Groves, Social Emotional Learning Coordinator, Fayette County Public Schools

Connections and Confirmations

Participation in the Working Group contributed to specific learnings and adoption of strategies relevant to SEL and learning differences. Many district leaders also reflected that the benefit of participation extended more broadly, beyond the content, to creating a network of colleagues to continue to learn with and from. In the survey administered after the Melbourne survey, 96 percent of district leaders agreed that they had formed new connections to colleagues in other districts, 96 percent said that they planned to connect with a colleague from another district—and nearly half (46 percent) had already been in contact.

“We formed such great connections and partnerships that this has been a lifelong benefit rather than just a trip.”

**—Marisa Janicek, Associate
Superintendent of Educational Services,
El Segundo Unified School District**

Leaders reported that these connections were beneficial in affirming both the importance of the work in which they were engaged and in confirming the shared experiences and challenges. According to the associate director of student support services in Fayette County, “One of the things the Working Group really affirmed for us is that even Surrey, [which] we feel is further beyond us [in SEL implementation], is running into some of the same barriers, which honestly was affirming. We’re all in this together. That was super helpful for us because we’ve not been doing this as long as some.”

The connections also opened up opportunities for cross-district learning and sharing to inform district planning and decisions. Here are some examples:

- For the associate superintendent of the Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind, the opportunity to visit the school for the deaf in Melbourne “was probably the most valuable part of the trip for me. [...] We’re a low instance disability. We must support one another. [...] I did get ideas from there. The United States is very focused on college ... which is great for the kids who are going to college, not great for the kids who are vocationally bound and can contribute and provide a meaningful input to society. Australia does a fantastic job of that. Their deaf school was incredible with vocational training and skills for their students. [...] I would love to continue to have a strong relationship with that school for the children’s sake, for the benefit of my student’s sake, for their administration’s sake. We can help one another and be supportive.”
- In planning for the wellness centers in El Segundo, the leadership team reached out to other districts. The superintendent reflected that connections were helpful toward “knowing that there are other districts here in our backyard [that] can also support. It’s that whole notion of taking advantage of those who have stepped before us and not recreating the work.”
- In Suffern, the director of school counseling and social emotional wellness is planning summer visits to two districts to better understand approaches to wellness—the “see how they do it and what they do.”

Indeed, the opportunity to forge these cross-district connections was so valued by district leaders that recommendations for future working groups centered on expanding opportunities to develop those relationships and partnerships throughout the learning experiences. Leaders noted, for instance, that “we wish we had more time to reflect, discuss, and plan after every panel, conversation, and presentation.” District leaders also expressed interest in continuing to have structured opportunities to gather and share information after the deep-dive convenings: “If we were to continue to meet [as a Working Group] after [the convenings were complete], we’d have meaningful dialogue, because we’ve all experienced something together.”

“We’ve gone through an experience together, a shared experience, and we know each other better.”

—Dr. Michelle Tanner, Associate Superintendent for the Deaf, Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind

Looking Ahead

The wellbeing of students and educators is a national—and global—concern as students and schools emerge from the isolation and trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. News reports and research consistently point to heightened levels of mental health needs and behavioral challenges in children and adolescents. Educator wellbeing is also an increasingly visible priority, as schools and districts struggle to support and retain teachers and staff.

Systemic approaches for enhancing SEL supports and interventions for all students and educators, including those with learning differences, can help to mitigate those concerns at the classroom, school, and district levels. The experiences and shared experiences of districts in the Working Group on SEL and Learning Differences accelerated the intentional implementation of new strategies and created the foundation for continued global learning and connections.