# SELPA Lead Agencies
# Year 1 Evaluation Findings

Within the System of Support are five Special Education Local Plan Area Lead Agencies (SELPA Leads) (four content and one system improvement): Imperial County SELPA, focused on English learners with disabilities; Marin County SELPA, focused on autism and evidence-based practices; Placer County SELPA, focused on access; South County SELPA, focused on disproportionality and equity; and System Improvement, coordinated among El Dorado County, Riverside County, and West San Gabriel SELPA.

The purpose of the SELPA Leads is to build the capacity of SELPAs in supporting local education agencies (LEAs) to meet the needs of students with disabilities and improve their outcomes, connect with partners, align priorities and integrate special education and general education, and facilitate resources and relationships.

RTI International administered surveys and conducted focus groups[1] to evaluate the work of the SELPA Leads. The evaluation findings are presented in the seven categories of practices for effective education networks that lead to systems change and improved student outcomes.
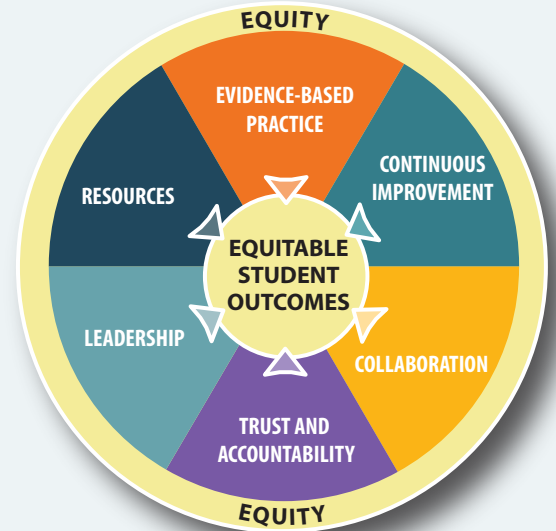


**A network that implements the above practices effectively will lead to improved student outcomes***

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**Technical assistance focused on Evidence-Based Practices improves student outcomes and builds organizations' capacity to deepen learning engagement for all students.**

- Nine-tenths of SELPA survey respondents reported that they understand evidence-based practices (EBPs) that lead to positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for students with disabilities.
- SELPA Leads build capacity in both process and content-related EBPs. Process EBPs are skills like coaching, motivational interviewing, and root cause analysis. Content-related EBPs are specific to the Lead Agency (e.g., assistive technologies, restorative practices).
- SELPA Leads described the capacity for using EBPs in terms of stages of implementation. One SELPA Lead framed the California Practitioner's Guide in different ways to meet awareness stage "entry points." Another SELPA Lead described needing to know the "drivers in the system" before implementing EBPs. A third SELPA Lead developed readiness protocols for the "adapting a practice" stage for LEAs.

**Organizations in the system engage in Continuous Improvement to identify challenges, try out solutions, implement changes, reflect on results, and improve outcomes.**

- Nine-tenths of SELPA partners reported incorporating continuous improvement in their work, with slightly less seeing SELPA Leads modeling the process, and 73% feeling equipped to support LEAs.
- SELPA Leads embed continuous improvement in their own work. They had experiences prior to the grant, naming implementation science, improvement science, or a cyclical process as approaches they know, have used, and continue to learn through teaching and from experts. New staff within SELPA Leads did not have prior knowledge but did gain experience, and therefore confidence, from colleagues.
- SELPA Leads identify SELPA continuous improvement needs (e.g., through readiness protocols) and both demonstrate and provide feedback on partner process implementation. Some SELPAs are strategizing to add trainings next year in areas like root cause analysis and monitoring implementation fidelity.

**Knowledge sharing and Collaboration Within and Across Organizations surfaces best practices and innovative solutions to make positive differences for students.**

- SELPA partners found collaborations with SELPA Leads helpful. Examples were regional connections about LEA needs, common goals ("kindred spirits"), and learning that virtual collaboration can enhance the work.
- SELPA Leads found alignment with other Leads within the System of Support helpful and necessary, for example, meeting with Geographic and Community Engagement Initiative Leads to build on one another's work, being well-received by Geographic Leads when requesting collaboration, and seeking to improve nonduplication and resource availability.
- SELPA Leads collaborate with experts and as experts on their topics. Leads noticed a shift from competing to collaborating with experts across the state, increased collaboration with general education, and being called on by the California Department of Education, school districts, and other Leads to present, write, share resources, and advise.

* Adapted from Rincón-Gallardo, S., & Fullan, M. (2016). Essential features of effective networks in education. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community.*

Developing **Trusting Relationships and Shared Accountability** for common goals creates the conditions needed to enable learning and implement change. Trust is crucial to engaging in challenging conversations and acknowledging what participants do and do not know.

- Two-thirds of SELPA survey respondents strongly agree that they felt safe or comfortable going to the SELPA Leads for assistance and brainstorming regarding difficult challenges.
- SELPA Leads talked about trust in two ways: with internal teams and with partners. Internally, Leads built opportunities to collaborate and build relationships. Leads approached partners as "listeners" willing to adapt rather than "experts" intending to dictate, and strong relationships were necessary for the work.
- Some SELPA Leads spoke about holding one another accountable to exploring mindset shifts, particularly around biases. One Lead discussed a training around mental models about students with disabilities and worked to "challenge themselves" on mental models "collectively to get better at something."

**Leadership** cultivates collaboration and co-creation rather than relying on compliance to achieve shared goals.

- On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (to a great extent), survey respondents rated SELPA Leads an average of 7.3 in providing useful support in modeling how to support LEAs. Using this same scale, they also reported that SELPA Leads should provide a slightly greater amount of support (an average rating of 8.5).
- A group of SELPA Leads spoke about focusing the 1st year of the grant on building the capacity of partners to become leaders not just for their own SELPAs but also for larger groups around particular topics (e.g., Universal Design for Learning).
- SELPA Leads spoke about being "thought partners" with their colleagues during the process of leadership capacity building. Leads recognized their capacity building for SELPAs to support LEAs was collaborative leadership, in which Leads demonstrate, coach, and leverage existing knowledge and skills of partners.

Effective networks and education systems **Curate and Develop Resources** that enable collaboration, promote continuous learning, and lead to improved outcomes for schools and students.

- Almost all (95%) SELPA partners who used SELPA Lead web resources found them helpful and reported that Leads were providing almost the right amount of resources.
- SELPA Leads reported that funding allowed them to expand existing work. Leads had enough staff in their content areas as well as for training and were able to add staff to serve more people.
- SELPA Leads curated and created new virtual resources. Although some Leads were already creating resources and tools online (e.g., predictive analysis on disproportionality), the COVID-19 pandemic challenge provided new opportunities to work with other Leads on nonduplication and creating new tools.

> "We're not just giving [SELPAs] tools. We're actually giving them background information [and demonstrating how] and why we're using the tool.... [The tools] all have meaning, purpose, and are equity driven."
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> *— SELPA Lead*

> "The Practitioner's Guide...is a clear way to address questions that were out in the field.... [Our training] directly connects to the needs of students with disabilities that are English language learners and tailors for the use of practitioners."
>
> *— SELPA Lead*

> "It's not us telling our SELPA colleagues what to do and how to do it. The project is really built around being thought partners with folks, recognizing the different landscape, the political landscape, the cultural landscape, everything that makes a SELPA a SELPA or a region a region in California."
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> *— SELPA Lead*

In an **Equitable System** professionals at all levels have the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to disrupt and replace biased policies and practices to ensure equally high outcomes for all students.

- SELPA survey respondents reported feeling confident in the knowledge and practices needed to disrupt systemic bias and inequities within the current system. However, they acknowledged needing support in enhancing their capacity to change organizational mindsets.
- Some SELPA Leads described equity as practices in various stages, with most in a self-awareness stage. Others actively provided tools for building equity mindsets, with one Lead hosting an equity conference.
- SELPA Leads focused on the added equity challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leads were confident in their ability to provide virtual resources to practitioners but underscored the difficulty in reaching students who might need support most (e.g., those in rural areas without reliable internet or those with significant disabilities). Leads also believed that virtual trainings on biases might not be as effective online as they were in person.

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[1] Findings are based on 63 partner survey respondents from SELPAs and county offices of education and eight SELPA Lead focus groups.

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