SELPA Lead Agencies Evaluation Findings
2020–2021

RTI INTERNATIONAL

INTRODUCTION

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

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 to evaluate the work of the SELPA Leads. During the Year 1 Evaluation (2019–2020, Year 2 of the SELPA Lead grants), the evaluation findings were presented in the seven categories of practices for effective education networks that lead to systems change and improved student outcomes. These categories were evidence-based practices, continuous improvement, collaboration, trust and accountability, leadership, resources, and equity. During the Year 2 evaluation (2020-2021, Year 3 of the SELPA Lead grants), two events effected the education context: (1) COVID-19, declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020, leading to a shift from in-person learning to virtual learning in schools and (2) the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota, USA, leading to worldwide protests and heightened awareness of racism and the need for equity and social justice. The Year 2 evaluation sought to uncover changes, successes, and challenges related to local effects in this context.

Evaluation questions that guided the Year 2 findings were as follows:

1. How did the SELPA Lead work change in the context of increased awareness of equity?

2. What were SELPA Leads' most successful activities and what will continue into Year 3?

3. What were the central challenges for SELPA Leads?

4. What support would help SELPA Leads with these challenges?

5. What collaborations occurred between SELPA Leads and the SOS?

1. How Work Changed Given Pandemic and Equity-Awareness Context

The purpose of the first evaluation question was to explore and describe equity within SELPA Lead activities. During the 2020–2021 school year, SELPA Leads provided capacity building, connection with partners, alignment with state priorities, and resources that centralized equity-related practices.

- **SELPA Leads noticed an increased "ease" regarding partners talking about equity.** SELPA Leads reported that equity "has always been on the forefront for us," so the increased awareness of equity did not change their practices significantly. However, conversations about equity with participants appeared easier than in years prior due to the increased national awareness and the pandemic. Leads agreed that there is continued work to do around equity, from agreeing on a common language to increasing practices that make a difference for historically marginalized students.

> **SELPA Lead on equity:** "I don't think [our focus on equity] had changed. It has just been highlighted more. It's more of a focus because of all of the things that are going on with the pandemic and the disparities that you see between those school districts that have the resources and those school districts and communities that are without."

- **SELPA partners reported learning about equity and how to approach equity issues.**
  - Eighty-three percent agreed or strongly agreed that "I am able to help myself and others *explore underlying beliefs and assumptions and their impact*."
  - Eighty-six percent agreed or strongly agreed that "I understand how *unconscious bias may be at play in practices and policies in my context*."
  - Seventy percent agreed or strongly agreed that "I have *multiple approaches for understanding, raising, and addressing equity issues*."
  - Seventy-eight percent agreed or strongly agreed that "I understand *what equity leadership might mean for me, given my identity and role*."
- Both SELPA Leads and partners emphasized a "moral imperative" for equity. Partners mentioned knowledge gained like definitions of racism, asset-based learning, identity, social justice, connection between equity issues and students with disabilities (SWD), and specific practices like reducing implicit biases, using responsive practices, creating a district equity statement, and building capacity for educators to do the same.

2. Most Successful Activities and Activities That Will Continue

The purpose of the second evaluation question was to identify primary successes that emerged from the original SELPA Lead objectives and the unique contextual adjustments. The most successful activities were the transition to virtual professional learning for participants, capacity building for participants in increasing outcomes of students with disabilities (especially in areas of data use and continuous improvement), tailoring of offerings for specific participant needs, and the resources that SELPA Leads provided.

- **Transitioning support from in person to online**, although initially challenging, led to benefits like serving more people due to the virtual format, integrating polling features for engagement and real-time training adaptations, having breakout rooms for varied group discussion formats, and creating virtual training materials for reaching participants in remote regions in the future. Partners pointed out the virtual format was successfully used to reach families (e.g., to have their voices heard and to hold meetings, like about individualized education plans [IEPs], virtually), provide resources to LEAs and students, increase participation from individuals in different geographic regions, and collaborate among professionals with efficiency (e.g., no driving), like between SELPAs and county offices of education.

> **SELPA Lead on virtual shift:** "Not everyone was familiar with Zoom. People didn't understand … and I think that was also a really big shift throughout the year as well. And I think that really has been something that has become a lot more successful for us … to make sure we didn't lose what we really wanted to make sure we presented."

- **Capacity building** was a success, both through virtual trainings and resources that were either newly developed or enhanced. SELPA Leads shared successes related to data, both creating and providing improved access to data tools to enhance data use for continuous improvement as well as increased feedback from participants to provide insight into the needs of the field. One Lead discussed the focus on scaling resources to meet the needs of more SELPAs through the support of a local technology partner. Partners agreed that SELPA Leads provided useful capacity building support to address improving outcomes for students with disabilities to an extent that matched their expectations.

- Partners often noted appreciation for the **support** they were getting from their SELPA Leads, like tailoring support to the distinct needs of the region so that information was useful and relevant to participants. Most SELPA partners reported support for online learning as excellent or good in the transition to online instruction and distance learning (81%), best practices in online instruction (78%), and supporting student social and emotional well-being (74%). Of the 153 survey participants who said that they used SELPA Lead web resources, 99% found the resources to be helpful in addressing the needs of students with disabilities. Several called out the Padlets for remote learning and transitioning back to school as helpful for both parents and educators.

- In addition to other successful activities like providing resources and capacity building, SELPA Leads will **continue virtual learning and conversations around equity, especially using data to drive the equity-centered decision making**. Resources they had developed can be used for in-person, virtual, or hybrid meetings because they can reach more people. One Lead shared, "We're quite rural and traveling anywhere for us is a challenge [without virtual professional learning]. We would not have been able to make so many connections statewide like we have even before the pandemic." Leads will continue to build from virtual engagement strategies, like planning for shorter modules, chunking information into smaller pieces, and being more ready to use resources in anticipation of the need for simple tools during busy school re-openings. Leads plan to continue equity-centered conversations and how to use and interpret data for improving equity, while finding ways to share data tools more widely so that participants do not have to pay others to get the same support.

3. Central Challenges for SELPA Leads

The purpose of the third evaluation question was to identify the greatest challenges for the SELPA Leads. These challenges were balancing workloads, and the tradeoffs between in-person and virtual formats, a need for additional staff, and measuring impact.

- Both SELPA Leads and partners faced the challenge of **balancing workloads**. SELPA Leads talked about how their staff have always worked hard because there is "a lot to produce and get done," but this year there appeared to be more potential for burnout, so supervisors were careful of not pushing staff into retirement or resignation and instead focused on prioritizing work. Leads shared that their commitment, passion, and experience helps them tackle the workload, but they are limited in what they can accomplish with a small staff. This workload challenge was also noted for participants: SELPA Leads talked about the difficulty in finding a balance between encouraging individuals to participate in the work and respecting the myriad demands that schools and districts are under. One Lead explained that this year has been a "struggle in terms of people's attention and how much time they can give you … even though we have people that were all committed because this is not just one and done training… They're just trying to get by day to day so that's definitely been a challenge, I think, for any of our projects in any of this work."

> **SELPA Lead: "When people are already completely spent and maxed out, then systems change and capacity building can feel like one more thing. So, we have to be really strategic about providing the most critical information and the most efficient way in order to make the best use of the people that we are working with."**

- Although there were benefits with virtual learning, there were also challenges with the **transition to virtual learning** in maintaining the high quality usually experienced in person. Early in the transition, as one SELPA Lead noted, there were groups of over 500 participants. Such a large number of participants does not work with the content nor for engagement and collaboration. Rebuilding content and strategies into virtual formats and planning for the move back to the in-person format added unanticipated work for staff. One Lead talked about the goal of the grant which was to build the capacity of SELPAs to support evidence-based practices in classroom settings, which "eventually we will all be back to, so balancing both (virtual and in person) without any additional time or funding" has been a challenge.

- SELPA Leads discussed challenges with **measuring impact**. One Lead talked about being intentional when the grant started on finding ways to "parse out change in the people that we're trying to help that we can attribute to our work." This Lead in particular had partnered with an evaluator to explore ways of measuring impact and was in the process of data collection. Another SELPA Lead had been working with an evaluator already but still struggled to understand the impact of the pandemic on the changes within the system.

- SELPA Leads mentioned some unique challenges. One discussed a need to **leverage expertise within the SOS**. The Lead wondered how to allow all involved to collaborate, emphasizing that "being in one single room, being able to mingle, go around with your cup of coffee" isn't possible to do virtually. The other challenge that at least two SELPA Leads noted was the need to **reestablish trust with families and communities**. One Lead highlighted that communities have long-term distrust of public systems, and the commitment to equity should "take into account what perspectives families might be coming from and what historic hurt or distrust has been part of that" to be responsive and come to an agreement on evidence-based practices.

4. Suggestions to Address Challenges and Ongoing Assistance

The purpose of the fourth evaluation question was to identify ways to address challenges, both from SELPA Leads and from their partners. SELPA Leads asked for more time to collaborate effectively, a better understanding of state-level priorities, and assistance with production of resources, including translation.

- For **collaboration** support, one SELPA Lead suggested that all-Leads meetings could increase opportunities to share what the Leads are doing and then discuss collaborations based on this information. Another Lead discussed focused meetings about what can be accomplished together.

- **Understanding of state-level priorities** focuses on communication. One SELPA Lead suggested communication about new leadership at the state level to help "make sure that we're all aligned and understand what the priorities are [which] lends itself to my other [suggestion] of more opportunities to partner with additional folds within the statewide system of support."

- **Translation and production support for resources and tools**: One SELPA Lead talked about having partners who were helping with translation as needed and to the extent possible: "They're doing this because everybody's pitching in during this pandemic and they really want our families to have the information that they need and that's what's equitable and appropriate. But there's other languages out there and large populations of other languages that aren't getting this good stuff made available to them."
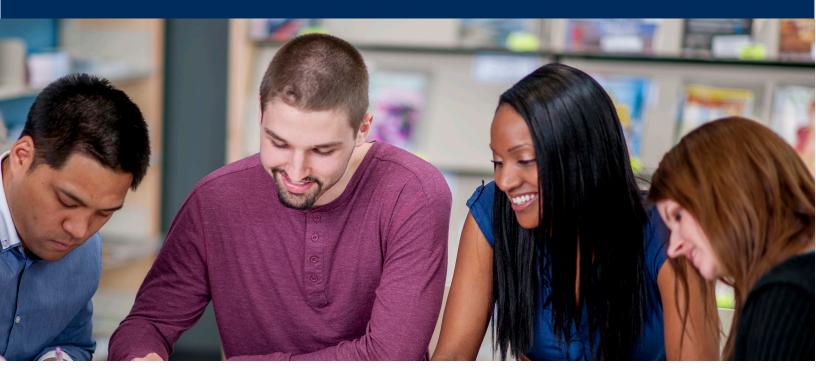
> **SELPA Lead:** "The collaboration we do with [other Leads]… they are so focused on what we can accomplish together and how we can partner together. If they gave us that opportunity with all of the Leads: What are we focused on? How can we partner together? What project can we come up with together that's going to be beneficial?"

SELPA partners had suggestions about more time for hands-on practice, scaling the work, and resource access:

- **Transitioning from knowledge to practice**. Many partners would like to have more time with the SELPA Leads to practice the skills learned and have opportunities for SELPA Lead coaches to work with them at their location "hands on." Some provided suggestions for help with increasing skills like using case studies and linking skills to district-level policies.

- **Scaling the SELPA Lead work**. Some partners identified the need for more funding to scale the SELPA Lead work. Suggestions included scaling to underserved locations and general education teachers and leaders.

- **Accessing resources or other content**. Partners reported an increased need for access to resources. They mentioned specific content needs, like adapting tools for students who are classified with moderate to severe (or low-incidence) disabilities, getting more information about special education law and IEPs, and finding ways to shift to equity mindsets.

5. Leveraging Collaborations Within SOS

The purpose of the fifth evaluation question was to address collaborations within the SOS. In general, SELPA Leads varied in the way they discussed leveraging collaborations, but all mentioned at least one way in which they had begun or continued to collaborate with other individuals and groups within the SOS.

- SELPA Leads plan to reach out to specialists in the SOS leading equity, reading, and math.

- It is helpful for SELPA Leads' leadership and executive teams to get information from other SOS teams.

- SELPA Leads partner with other Leads doing similar work: "Anytime we're both in the same sandbox we immediately get on the same page and collaborate together…. One of our goals is to have some resources very much connected to the other groups … at the end of the project."

- Virtual communication has helped with SELPA Leads' ability to connect with new SOS contacts and share each other's work.

- Once SELPA Leads get new information from other SOS leads, they share it with districts, as not all information has been disseminated "all the way down yet."

SELPA Lead on connecting with a Geographic Lead: "We meet frequently to share each other's work and where we can find commonalities, wanting to leverage our work… I think the virtual platform has given us opportunities. We're quite rural and traveling anywhere for us is a challenge. We would not have been able to make so many connections statewide like we have."