

FROM VISION TO ACTION:

**HOW PORTRAITS OF
A GRADUATE ALIGN
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL
COMPETENCIES AND
FUTURE READINESS**

THIS REPORT IS FOR RESEARCHERS, POLICYMAKERS, AND EDUCATORS LOOKING TO UNDERSTAND PATTERNS ACROSS DISTRICT PORTRAITS OF A GRADUATE AND ADVANCE THE CONVERSATION TOWARD EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
INTRODUCTION	7
METHOD	12
RESULTS	15
DISCUSSION	20
THE PATH FORWARD FOR PORTRAITS OF A GRADUATE	22
REFERENCES	23

ABSTRACT

Portraits of a Graduate have emerged as policy and practice visions with the promise to move forward a shared framework for student success. With the potential to address a gap in the knowledge, skills, and mindsets most requested by employers, this study examined the extent to which district-level Portraits of a Graduate emphasized social, emotional, and academic competencies. We also assessed elements to support effective implementation in order to understand how districts are beginning to turn Portraits from visions into action. Accordingly, we analyzed 272 district Portraits of a Graduate drawn from 36 states in the United States collected in spring 2025. Using automated text analysis, we identified the prevalence of terms aligned with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL's) five social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making), workforce-relevant competencies commonly cited in job advertisements, college and career readiness competencies, and academic, technical, and technology-related competencies. In addition, we conducted subject-matter expert coding to assess the presence of implementation features, including user friendliness, instructional guidance, measurement, developmental milestones, school support systems, and Portraits of Educators. Results indicated that the CASEL SEL competencies were universally represented across district-level Portraits of a Graduate. Relationship skills, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and workforce skills (i.e., skills highly requested by employers, such as communication and adaptability) appeared in more than 95 percent of district-level Portraits of a Graduate. These skills frequently occurred alongside academic content knowledge and technical competencies, highlighting the inextricable link between these competencies and students' ability to execute on their academic knowledge in effective ways in work and future academic environments. District-level Portraits of a Graduate show strong alignment with employer priorities related to social and emotional competencies. A relatively small percentage of Portraits included guidance for implementation, measurement strategies, or developmental progressions, suggesting opportunities to strengthen the structures needed to support coherent, system-level implementation. We include bright spot examples of districts that advanced these practices and discuss how districts can use well-established social and emotional learning approaches to make progress toward developing student competencies. Policymakers and practitioners may find these results helpful in identifying opportunities to strengthen Portraits of a Graduate as tools for translating vision into sustained instructional and organizational change.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Students' success in school, career, and life depends on deep interplay between academic knowledge and social and emotional competencies—which include skills such as communication, adaptability, self-management, empathy, and responsible decision-making. Although employers increasingly seek these skills in employees, persistent gaps remain between the competencies most valued in postsecondary settings and those that applicants demonstrate. This gap underscores the importance of intentionally prioritizing social and emotional competency development integrated with academic content throughout K–12 education.

Portraits of a Graduate are vision documents at the school, district, or state level that have emerged as a widely used strategy for articulating a shared vision of student success that integrates academic, social, and emotional competencies (Atwell & Tucker, 2024). By defining these competencies, which incorporate the knowledge, skills, and mindsets students need after high school, Portraits of a Graduate can align instruction, policy, and community expectations.

This report examined the competencies that districts across the United States articulate in their Portraits of a Graduate. We analyzed 272 district-level Portraits of a Graduate published between 2014 and 2024 across 36 states. Using a combination of automated text analysis and subject-matter expert coding, we examined the prevalence of social and emotional, workforce-relevant, and academic and technical competencies. We also coded implementation features, such as guidance, measurement, and system-level supports, which are necessary to translate visions into action.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ***Social, emotional, and workforce-relevant competencies are universally represented in district-level Portraits of a Graduate.*** All 272 district-level Portraits of a Graduate included at least one social and emotional competency. Specific skills frequently cited in job advertisements—such as communication, adaptability, teamwork, and problem-solving (many of which are embodied in social and emotional competencies)—appeared in more than 95 percent of Portraits of a Graduate, underscoring how Portraits elevate competencies that cut across subjects and postsecondary pathways.
- ***Communication, adaptability, and reflection appeared most frequently.*** “Communication,” “adaptability,” and “reflection” were highly prioritized competencies for districts, highlighting the conceptual overlap and shared priorities across education and employment frameworks.
- ***Most Portraits of a Graduate are clear and readable, while implementation features represent an area for growth.*** Nearly four in five Portraits of a Graduate had clearly defined competencies. Some have begun to incorporate features that support sustained implementation—such as instructional guidance (11 percent), measurement or accountability processes (15 percent), or developmental milestones (5 percent). Importantly, the Portraits that do include these features illuminate promising pathways for translating vision into sustained practice.
- ***System-level supports represent high-leverage opportunities.*** The districts that explicitly describe school support systems, developmental progressions, or a Portrait of an Educator offer insights and point to significant opportunities to strengthen coherence, alignment, and impact across classrooms and schools. Several of these bright spots are reported on in order to draw attention to models of implementation.

IMPLICATIONS

Together, the results suggest that district-level Portraits of a Graduate strongly reflect priorities related to social and emotional competence and workforce readiness alongside academic and technical competencies. Greater attention to implementation features—such as explicit guidance and measurement, which some districts have already begun to incorporate—is needed to fully realize their potential impact on teaching, learning, and student academic and postsecondary outcomes. Social and emotional learning has a strong evidence base showing its effectiveness in developing these competencies and can be used as a tool to meaningfully strengthen implementation.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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INTRODUCTION

We use the term “competencies” to be inclusive of knowledge, skills, and mindsets, representing a complex constellation of constructs that are flexibly and appropriately applied across contexts (Pittman & Irby, 2024). Where relevant, we specify the domain of competency (e.g., “social and emotional” or “technological”). We also indicate specific skills (subsumed under competencies) for more detailed reporting when applicable. When using the term social and emotional learning (SEL), we are referring to the process of developing social and emotional competencies.

In order to succeed in school and beyond, students need to develop competencies, which include knowledge, skills, and mindsets they can flexibly adapt to a variety of contexts during their K-12 education and afterwards, including workplaces, college, the military, and as active members of society. Research has clearly shown that social and emotional learning (SEL)—the process of developing social and emotional competencies¹—establishes a foundation of well-being and academic success (e.g., Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg, 2023; Ha et al., 2025; Taylor et al., 2017) that is necessary for post-secondary education and employment (Dermody et al., 2022; Steele et al., 2024). The framework of SEL is distilled into five broad, interrelated intra- and interpersonal competencies, each encompassing multiple skills (Figure 1):

Self-awareness involves identifying emotions, building self-confidence and self-efficacy, and developing interests and a sense of purpose.

Self-management includes exhibiting self-discipline and self-motivation, setting personal and collective goals, managing time effectively, using planning and organizational skills, and taking initiative.

Social awareness involves taking others’ perspectives, demonstrating empathy, showing respect, and appreciating diverse experiences.

Relationship skills encompass effective communication, developing positive relationships, practicing teamwork and collaborative problem-solving, and resolving conflicts constructively.

Responsible decision-making includes identifying and solving problems, demonstrating adaptability, curiosity, and open-mindedness, and applying critical thinking both inside and outside of school.



Figure 1. CASEL’s Social and Emotional Learning Framework (CASEL, 2020)

¹ SEL is defined as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, 2020; Weissberg et al., 2015).

These competencies can help students become better communicators, cooperative members of a team, effective leaders and self-advocators, resilient individuals, and caring, concerned members of their communities, which will help them succeed in a variety of post-secondary settings (Johnson et al., 2000; Schaps et al., 2004). Research consistently shows that SEL enhances—does not compete with—academic learning, cognitive development, and technical proficiency (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Ha et al., 2025). For example, problem-solving promotes critical thinking, creativity, and math content knowledge (Rhodes, 2020), while skills such as adaptability and self-management support persistence and learning across subjects (Sorrenti et al., 2025). There is ample evidence linking social and emotional competencies (and the skills they subsume) to educational and career success because they enable students to effectively execute on academic and content knowledge.

Educational success. Longitudinal research connects social and emotional competencies developed in kindergarten and primary school with higher rates of graduation (Jones et al., 2015). For example, one study found that children who participated in SEL programs (to develop social and emotional competencies) had a 23 percent higher graduation rate than those who did not receive an SEL program, with improvements in self-management driving positive changes in classroom behavior (Sorrenti et al., 2025). Globally, specific skills and mindsets such as motivation, persistence, and curiosity are related to higher grades in reading, math, and the arts, in addition to higher rates of attendance, high school completion, and social mobility aspiration (OECD, 2024). A recent meta-analysis of 40 studies provides robust evidence that universal SEL is associated with improved test scores and grades, including in math and literacy (Ha et al., 2025). Positive outcomes do not end at the schoolhouse, however, as SEL has been linked to a variety of metrics corresponding to employability and career success.

Employability and career success. Students whose teachers rated them as high in social and emotional competence in kindergarten (e.g., students who got along well with others, shared and cooperated well) show higher rates of full-time employment (Jones et al., 2015). Self-control in childhood has been associated with positive indicators in adulthood related to finances, health, and social behavior (e.g., criminal offending), even after accounting for other predictors, such as intelligence, social class, and challenges in adolescence (Moffitt et al., 2011). Communication skills, higher-order thinking skills, self-control, positive self-concept, and emotional intelligence relate to workforce success (Cherniss, 2000; Lopes et al., 2006; Lippman et al., 2015). These skills are not only important for success in a given job, but also in selecting, applying, and interviewing for jobs and navigating pathways to employment by building relationships to support a professional network (Atwell, 2023). More than ever, students need social and emotional competencies to adapt to a rapidly changing landscape of work (America Succeeds, 2021). More broadly, persisting through tough tasks, managing frustration, and curiosity are just as critical after high school as they are in formal K-12 educational settings (Johnson & Wiener, 2017).

EMPLOYERS VALUE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

Employers increasingly recognize the value of social and emotional competencies. The top skills sought by employers map clearly and cleanly onto CASEL's five core SEL competencies (Yoder et al., 2020). Further, a crosswalk analysis between social and emotional competencies and employability skills reveal substantial overlap, suggesting that while terminology may differ, the underlying concepts align (Wisniewski & Foster, 2021). For example, in a comprehensive survey of employers in diverse sectors of industry, including engineering, information technology/computing, professional services (e.g., business, human resources), science, and social science, participants rated the importance of the following: emotional self-awareness, emotional self-control, initiative, motivation, adaptability, positive outlook, empathy, communication, conflict management, and teamwork. Over 85 percent of employers rated all as either "very important" or "important" (Jameson et al., 2015).

Global employer perspectives echo these findings. LinkedIn’s 2019 Global Talent Trends survey of more than 5,000 talent professionals found that 91 percent consider social and emotional competencies (referred to in the report as “soft skills”) critical to the future of work, and 80 percent indicated these competencies are increasingly vital to company success (Lobosco, 2019). The Work Economic Forum Future of Jobs report finds that employers seek out analytical thinking more than any other skill (World Economic Forum, 2025). And the majority (76 percent) of advertisements for jobs (hereafter “job ads”) analyzed listed at least one social and emotional competency or underlying skill (referred to in the American Succeeds (2025) report as “durable skills”). Guerra et al.’s (2014) PRACTICE framework similarly links social and emotional competencies to related key skill clusters and the Big Five personality traits (which have been shown to relate to workforce success, particularly for conscientiousness and emotional stability; Barrick et al., 2001), offering a theoretical bridge between educational and workforce skill models.

Despite the strong connections between social and emotional competencies and educational and career success—and the growing recognition of importance from employers—the largest gap between skills desired by employers and those possessed by applicants is in the social and emotional category (Yoder et al., 2020). The persistence of this gap necessitates strategies for prioritizing social and emotional competency development in K-12 education.

PRIORITIZING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES IN EDUCATION

Developing social and emotional competencies meaningfully and systemically requires building awareness of SEL among educators, defining what success looks like, and facilitating collaboration among stakeholders (Johnson & Wiener, 2017). State and local policies, such as state standards for SEL, can facilitate this systemic approach (Dymnicki et al., 2013). Additionally, supportive policies and conditions (e.g., integration of SEL into the state strategic plan, SEL integrated into academic content standards) are associated with higher levels of SEL implementation (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024). States and districts are increasingly turning to Portraits of a Graduate to provide a practical vision and framework for cultivating social and emotional competencies in education.

PORTRAITS OF A GRADUATE

Portraits of a Graduate² (hereafter referred to as “Portraits”) are visions created by education stakeholders at the state, district, and/or school level. Portraits provide a shared framework for student postsecondary success that connects communities, schools, and families, emphasizing social and emotional competencies alongside academic and technical knowledge, as well as other skills such as financial and digital literacy (Atwell & Tucker, 2024).

By defining the competencies required for postsecondary education, careers, and engaged citizenship, Portraits create a bridge between educational policy and the knowledge, skills, and mindsets students need for their futures.

Portraits can be created and implemented at the state, district, and/or school level (Terrell et al., 2025 outlines different models of Portrait development). The relevance of Portraits has grown rapidly across the past 15 years alongside increasing recognition of SEL’s role in career and college readiness (Brodersen, 2020).

² Additional terms that describe these documents include “Profile of a Graduate,” “Portrait of a Learner,” “Portrait of a [district name/mascot],” and “Vision of a Learner,” among others.

Currently, 20 states and the District of Columbia have created Portraits, spread across Democrat-, Republican-, and split-controlled states (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024³), emphasizing non-partisan support for Portraits as a tool to support student outcomes. In a scan of state-level Portraits published between 2011 and 2023, the most commonly cited specific skills included critical thinking/problem-solving, social awareness/active citizen, communication skills, self-management skills, and academic and technical knowledge (Atwell & Tucker, 2024). This constellation of skills highlights both the importance of social and emotional competencies and their role alongside academic and technical competencies, all in service of holistically supporting postsecondary success.

Stewart (2020) argues that district-level Portraits can help establish coherence and shared vision for districts, incorporating multiple voices, including teachers and school leaders as well as students, families, and local community members (see also Dickason, 2025). By including multiple voices, Portraits represent a diversity of stakeholder perspectives. A previous scan of 69 district Portraits highlighted social and emotional competencies such as “practice self-awareness and regulation”, “collaborate across difference”, and “analyze to understand” (Mills et al., 2024). Organizations are beginning to collect evidence that suggests Portraits can have the potential for meaningful impacts. Battelle for Kids (now part of AASA), which supports districts developing Portraits, reports that the majority of education leaders indicate that their portraits have had a moderate or high impact on district communities, student learning experiences, and instructional practices (Battelle for Kids, 2025).

Below we provide an example of a district that was an early adopter of a Portrait of Graduate to share an in-depth look at how their vision has progressed across the past decade.

District Portrait of a Graduate Example: Fairfax County Public Schools

The Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) Portrait of a Graduate has proved sustainable since it was first published in 2014, through changes in leadership and restructuring. The [FCPS Portrait](#) includes these five attributes⁴



Communicator



Collaborator



**Ethical &
Global Citizen**



**Creative &
Critical Thinker**



**Goal-Directed &
Resilient Individual**

Their public website includes clear descriptions of each attribute, related questions for caregivers to discuss with their children, and videos of students describing ways they have developed each attribute in school and beyond. FCPS stands out as an example where the Portrait is student and community-owned—it has transformed into the basis for student-led projects and family and community events and is supported by a thriving cohort of school-based leaders who are committed to deepening implementation over time. In our conversation with district leaders, three aspects of their Portrait stood out:

- 1. The Portrait of a Graduate is part of the district's strategic plan.** [FCPS' strategic goal for academic growth and excellence](#) includes specification that students choose one to two attributes from their Portrait to focus on and demonstrate growth (as measured by teachers) each year in a presentation of learning. During these celebratory presentations, students at all grade levels share examples of work and experiences that show how they have progressed in their chosen attribute

³ Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024 reported on 17 states; New York published their portrait in 2025.

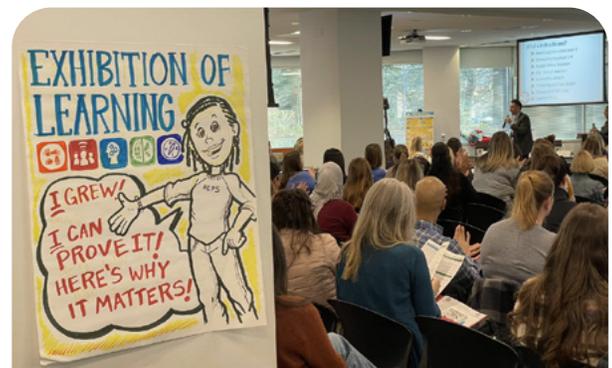
⁴ For the case study, instead of using “competency,” we use the word that the district has chosen to characterize their content, which is “attribute.”

to an audience that can include peers, staff, and families. The district collects and publishes data on the percentage of students who complete a presentation of learning and demonstrate growth. Participation is often most comprehensive in schools where leaders have also incorporated the presentation of learning into their school's improvement plan, suggesting benefit to connecting the Portrait to other districtwide efforts.

2. Promoting teacher voice in Portrait development is key. According to Abbey Miller, a learning innovations specialist within the Department of Curriculum & Instruction, the first few years with the Portrait were about making it usable. The collaborative process that began with creating the Portrait continued, which allowed them to stay in tune with teacher needs and understand when to push for wider implementation and when to allow teachers time to adapt.

First, a team of teacher leaders broke down the high-level language of the original Portrait to develop more specific skills and look-fors for each grade band and created resources for making the Portrait visible in classrooms and embedded within curriculum resources. Their goal was to help teachers see how readily the attributes fit within their academic content and for students to make regular connections between their learning and lifelong skills. Over the years, district leaders have worked hand-in-hand with schools to develop professional learning experiences and implementation tools (such as this [presentation of learning rubric](#) and [probing questions for students](#)).

Expectations for school-level implementation are flexible on purpose: Each individual school can decide how students will learn about the attributes throughout the year and how they will structure presentations of learning, who attends, whether it is required, and how students and staff are accountable for working toward it. While this flexible approach makes it more challenging to meet the district's stated implementation goals, it has paid off in an essential aspect: Teachers and leaders from across the district have embraced the Portrait and are invested in making it part of students' experience at their schools. The district's Portrait of a Graduate Innovator Cohort includes teachers from 88 schools, proportionate across elementary, middle, and high schools. They learn together throughout the year and share their progress and creative solutions at a Share Fair at the end of the year.



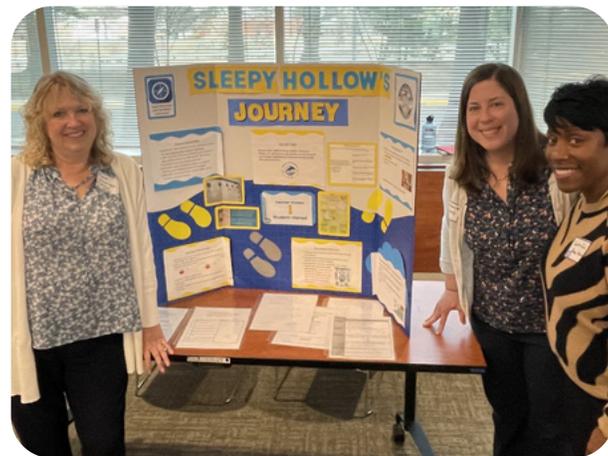
After the Share Fair, teachers said:

"This morning I was feeling inspired to learn and grow. Now I am invigorated by everybody's ideas and I'm ready to create, build, and share this work at my school."

"As my colleagues and I were sharing our display and answering questions, we realized how far our school has actually come in our Portrait of a Graduate Presentation of Learning journey since the beginning of the school year."

3. Student ownership is the explicit goal. On one poster presented at the Share Fair, representatives from Sleepy Hollow Elementary wrote that the attributes were moving from "Teacher-Known: Student-Owned," recognizing that while teachers are attentive to the attributes and measure student progress (i.e., during the presentations of learning), it is even more important for students to see how the attributes are an important part of their lives and to tell their own story of progress.

There are many ways this can be accomplished, but the district’s focus on the presentation of learning communicates that the goal is about student ownership and agency. “What really matters is that students are owning the language and are aware of why these skills matter ... it’s about student empowerment,” commented Miller. Staff support students in the process of reflecting, setting goals, and observing their progress, but students choose an attribute, select work samples, and describe how they are changing and growing. Recent graduate and former FCPS student school board representative Megan Sawant spoke about her experience, saying, “What is so important about the Presentations of Learning is having students reflect and make the connection, because that’s truly how [we] grow.” At many schools, families are invited to attend student presentations of learning. As the community becomes familiar and invested, their positive feedback also helps sustain the practice over time. [Hear from young people and their families about their experiences with the presentation of learning here.](#)



As with any initiative worth taking on, a Portrait of a Graduate requires resources, continuous improvement, and a systemwide commitment to ensuring that there are real, lasting benefits for students. Hard work, yes, but when students are able to use the Portrait to drive their learning and reflect on their growth, it’s worth it. In the sections that follow, we examine patterns across district Portraits, highlighting the competencies emphasized and conditions for effective implementation.

METHOD

We collected district-level Portraits of a Graduate in the spring of 2025. Portraits were published as early as 2014, with the majority published 2022-2024 (Figure 2), and came from two primary sources: (1) websites of districts that have a past or present affiliation with CASEL (number of districts = 101) and (2) public galleries of Portraits of a Graduate, including Battelle for Kids (N = 100), Scaling Student Success (number of districts = 90), Getting Smart (number of districts = 9), and Colorado Education Initiative (number of districts = 13). After removing duplicate districts, we had a total of 272 districts across 36 states for analysis (Figure 3).

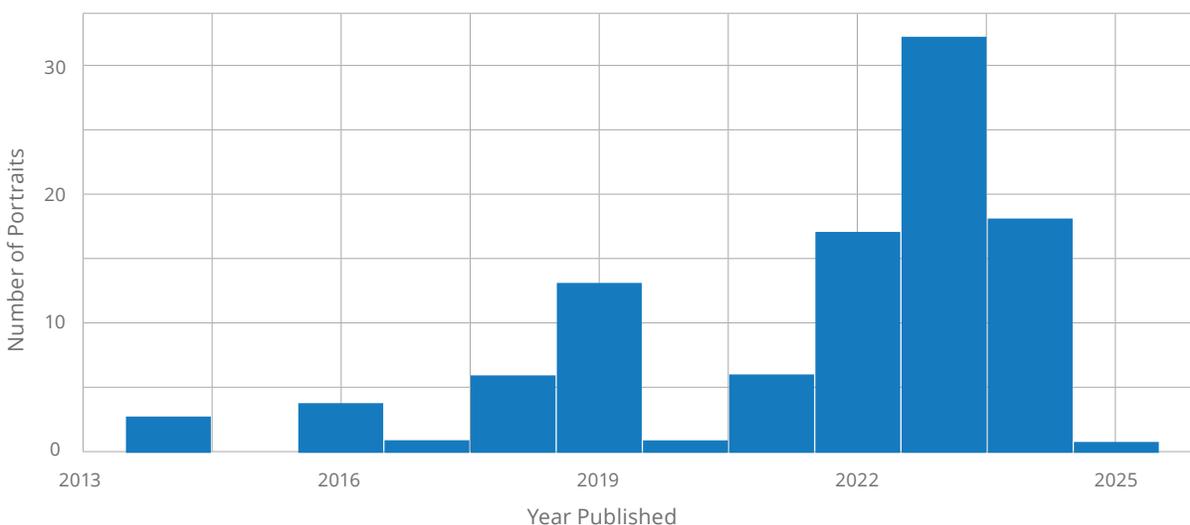


Figure 2. Distribution of years when the sampled Portraits were published

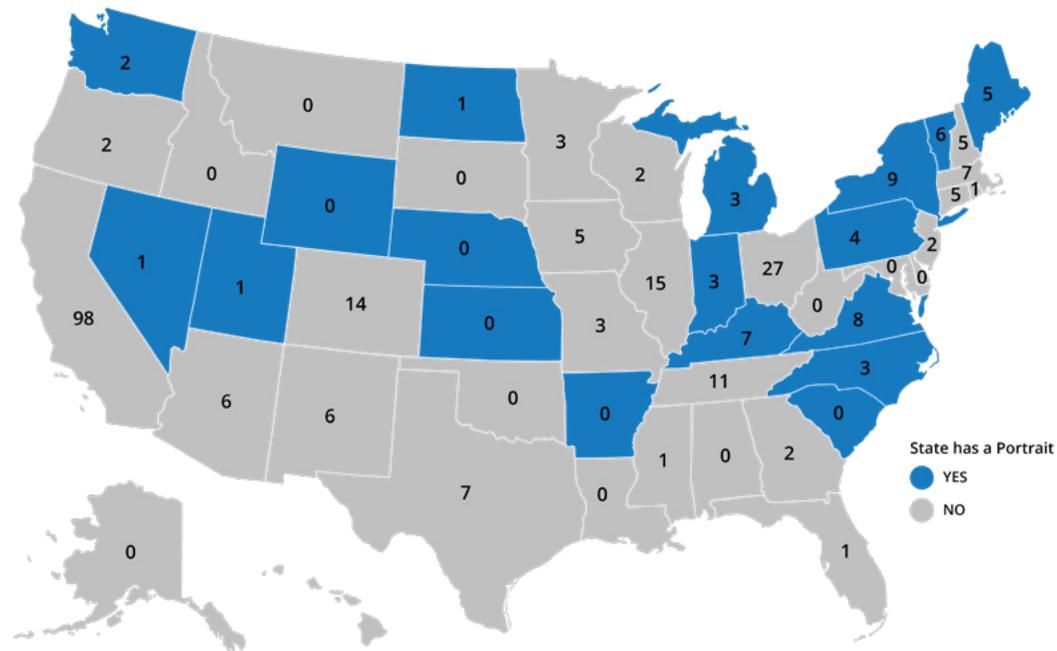


Figure 3. Number of district-level Portraits sampled by state. States in blue have a state Portrait of a Graduate whereas states in gray do not.

PORTRAIT SCAN APPROACH

We used two approaches to characterize the content of Portraits:

1. We extracted specific *terms* across a number of categories.
2. We examined broader *implementation features* that could support effective implementation.

We describe both approaches below and report the results in order, presenting first our findings on *terms* and second our findings on *implementation features*.

TERMS

We created a script (using R programming software) to automatically detect and record a collection of terms in the Portraits that fall under the competency areas listed below. An initial list of terms was generated using the sources and methods noted below. For each of the competencies, we used ChatGPT to expand the initial list of terms by identifying potential lexical and morphological variations, derivatives, and synonyms or synonymous expressions. Five team members additionally reviewed and provided feedback on these lists. This approach expanded the terms in order to capture variants that reflect the diverse ways that districts might include them in their Portraits. Please note that while the list of terms was intended to be comprehensive, it is not exhaustive⁵. Additionally, given the conceptual overlap between competencies, in some cases the same term appears in multiple categories; this overlap was particularly frequent across social and emotional competencies, job ad competencies, and career and college readiness competencies.

⁵ When searching for terms, we focused on the primary Portrait of a Graduate document (typically one to two pages), rather than additional supplementary materials. Our coding, while systematic, cannot capture every possible variant or nuance of language used across Portraits. Second, the formats of Portraits—ranging from PDFs to interactive webpages and videos—created challenges for consistent extraction via R, meaning some content may have been overlooked or interpreted differently (e.g., a word embedded within a graphic); however, we conducted quality control checks to minimize this concern. If you are interested in the full term list, please contact CASEL.

- **Social and emotional competencies:** Terms were extracted from CASEL's framework within the [Explore SEL](#) dashboard of the [Taxonomy Project](#). We used the full list of terms subsumed under each individual competency.
 - [Self-awareness](#) (e.g., reflection, self-efficacy, identifying emotions)
 - [Self-management](#) (e.g., perseverance, problem-solving, self-discipline)
 - [Social awareness](#) (e.g., empathy, perspective-taking, respect for others)
 - [Relationship skills](#) (e.g., communication, teamwork, caring)
 - [Responsible decision-making](#) (e.g., leadership, decision-making, analyzing situations)
- **Job ad competencies:** Terms extracted from the top skills as reported by [Indeed](#) and [LinkedIn](#) (e.g., adaptability, communication, teamwork).
- **Career and college readiness competencies:** Terms extracted from two widely used definitions of college and career readiness (e.g., goal-setting, collaborative learning, technology skills), one from the education researcher [David T. Conley](#) and one from the education nonprofit, [Achieve](#).
- **Content area and technical competencies:** Terms generated to cover K-12 content areas and expanded upon using ChatGPT (e.g., academic success, mentions of academic content areas such as math, history).
- **Technology competencies:** Terms generated from the [International Society for Technology in Education \(ISTE\) standards](#) and [K-12 Computer Science Framework](#) (e.g., digital citizenship, computational thinking, responsible use of technology).

IMPLEMENTATION FEATURES

Next, one of the team members completed subject-matter expert coding of the Portraits and additional supplementary materials that often accompany them (training with team members created consensus on coding definitions). Specifically, this coding was intended to capture the ways that districts support effective implementation of Portraits. We reasoned that support for implementation is necessary to translate vision into action. For all implementation features, we coded either “yes” (the feature was present) or “no” (the feature was not present). We coded the following features as defined below:

- **User friendliness:**
 - Clear and easily digestible visualization
 - Avoids overly technical language or jargon
 - Clear definitions of the competencies
- **Guidance:** How the Portrait can be effectively implemented and used to inform instructional activities.
- **Measurement:** How the district will assess progress or accountability toward fulfilling the Portrait's goals.
- **Developmental Milestones:** Defines competencies across age and/or grade bands.
- **School Support Systems:** Describes the conditions for an effective learning context that would support the development of the Portrait's skills (e.g., career-connected learning).
- **Portrait of an Educator:** Accompanying “Portrait of an Educator” outlines the skills and qualities desired of an effective educator in the district.

RESULTS

TERMS

All competencies were well-represented across the Portraits, indicating the many interconnected ingredients that are deemed necessary to support student success (Figure 4). Notably, job ad competencies and SEL competencies of relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making appeared in nearly all of the Portraits (>95 percent). All districts included at least one social and emotional competency (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, or responsible decision-making). Ninety-seven percent included at least three competencies, including at least one intrapersonal competency (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making) and one interpersonal competency (i.e., relationship skills, social awareness). The Portraits tended to center evergreen, durable competencies that are foundational to all learning and can be applied flexibly to support students across content areas throughout the K-12 education continuum and in career, higher education, and life, while content area/technical and technology-specific competencies appeared less prominently. Importantly, these competencies operate in tandem in order for students to execute on academic knowledge in an effective way across work and future academic environments.

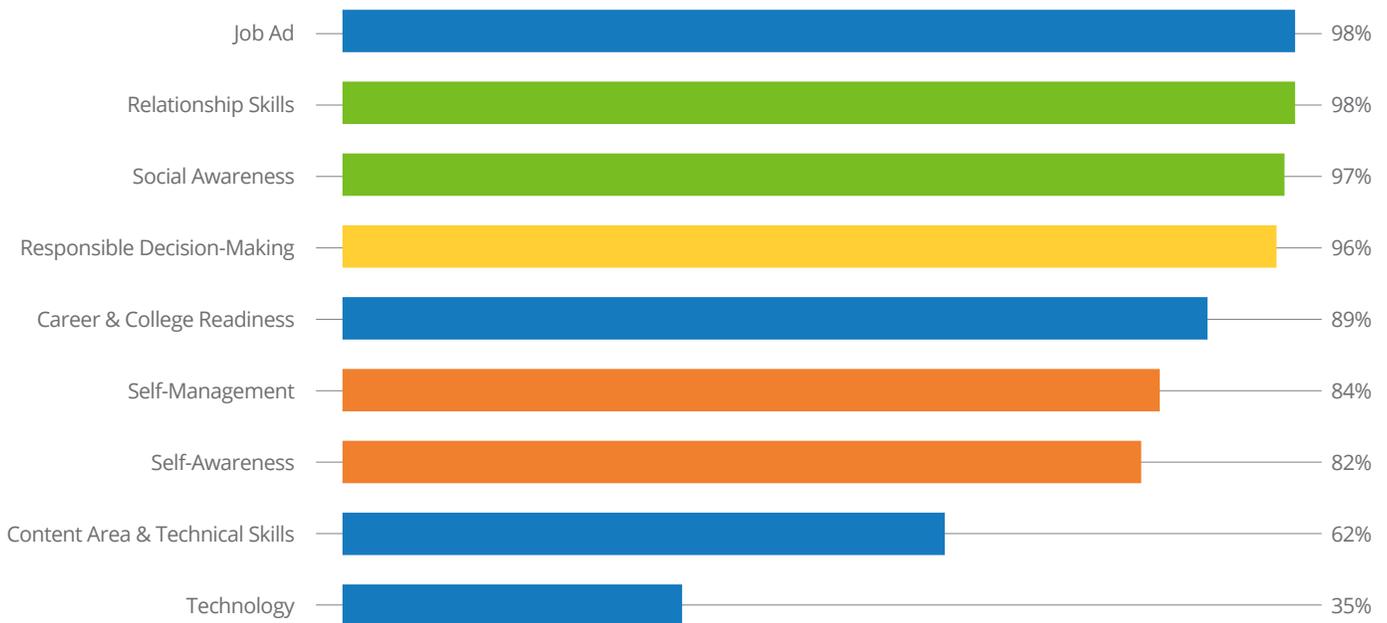


Figure 4. Percent of Portraits that include relevant term categories.

Note: Colors aligned with [CASEL's SEL Framework wheel](#).

We next examined the specific terms included most frequently across the Portraits (Figure 5). We rolled up the term variants into the singular term (e.g., “communicator” and “communicates effectively” were rolled up into “communication”). Among the most common terms that appeared across the Portraits were communication, adaptability, and reflection. Additionally, we examined the top terms within each category and found substantial overlap across competencies. For example, “communication” was a top term under social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, job ads, and career and college readiness (Figure 6) and reflection was a top term under self awareness and responsible decision-making. Adaptability was identified as the top skill promoted in job ads by LinkedIn in 2024, indicating that, “since the pace of change in the world of work is predicted to increase, adaptability will help you stay versatile and composed amid these changes” (LinkedIn, 2024). Adaptability also corresponds to skills defined with CASEL’s five competencies, most closely resembling “thinking flexibly,” which appears as a related term under [responsible decision-making](#).

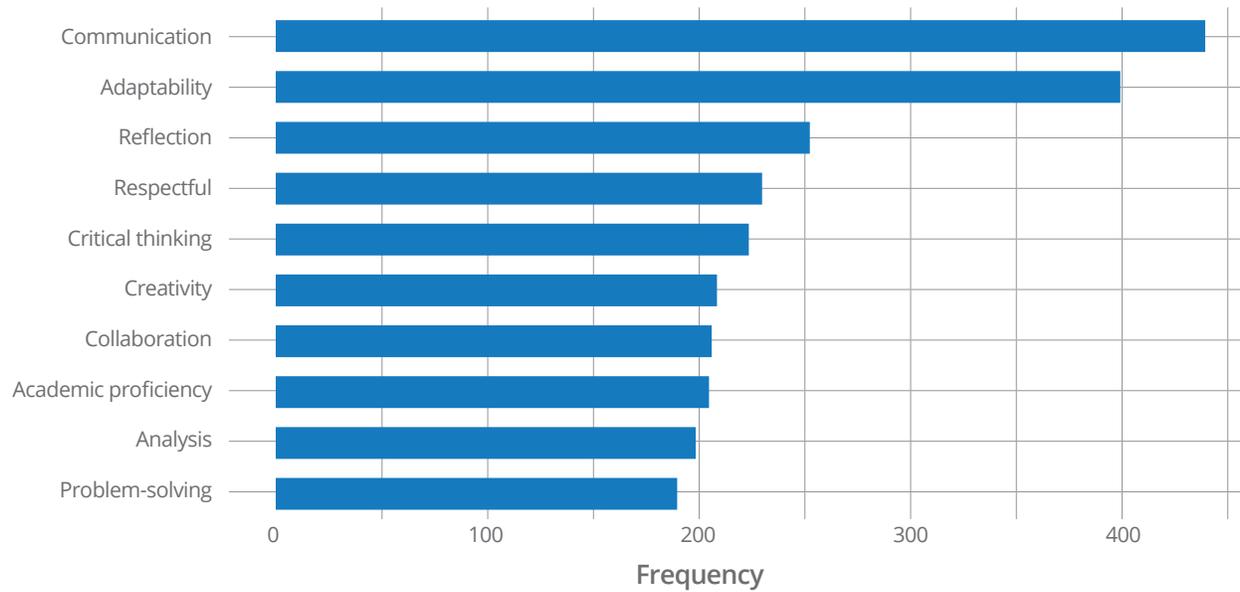


Figure 5. Top terms that appeared across all Portraits.

Note: some terms occur multiple times within a single Portrait under different variants

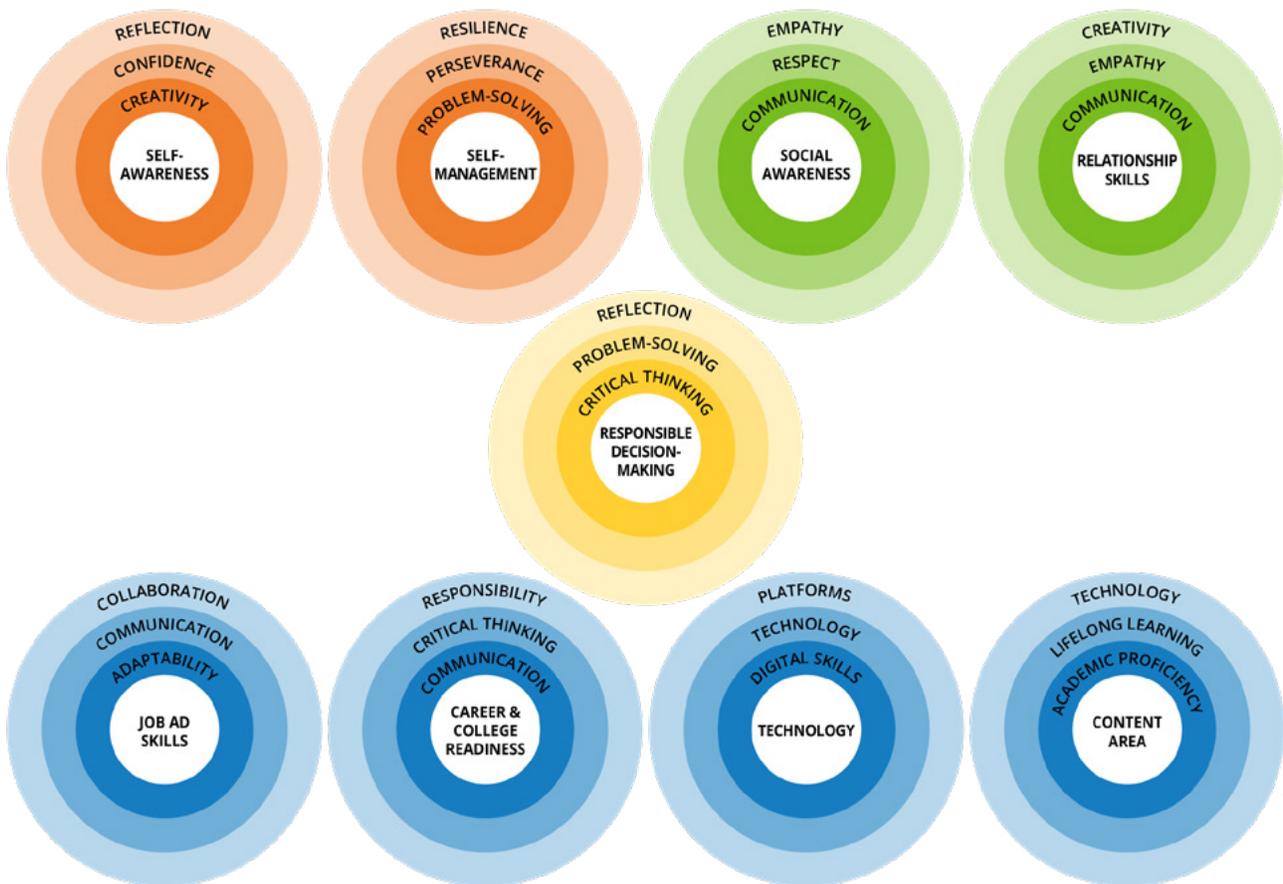


Figure 6. Top terms for each competency. Note: Colors aligned with [CASEL's SEL Framework wheel](#).

IMPLEMENTATION FEATURES

Reasoning that effective implementation is key to actualizing the visions articulated in Portraits, we next examined a number of features that can provide understanding about the practices districts are putting into place to guide implementation and to assess effectiveness. We describe our findings below and showcase district bright spots. Given that the majority of Portraits scanned were developed in the past five years, these bright spots can serve as models for how to translate the potential of Portraits to meaningful impact.



79 Percent of Portraits Were User-Friendly

There were many different formats for Portraits, including simple text or pdf documents, text with illustrative visuals, interactive webpages, and videos. User-friendly Portraits that are accessible to a broad audience (e.g., parents, educators, students):

- Were one to two pages with text integrated into a clear visual.
- Used plain language and avoided jargon.
- Included clear definitions for broader categories

BRIGHT SPOTS

Columbus City Schools' (OH) [Portrait of a Graduate](#) has a clear visual highlighting their target competencies. Their stand-alone Portrait poster includes lay definitions (e.g., under "communication" it states, "Our students will effectively express thoughts and ideas using oral, written, and nonverbal skills while being active listeners able to decipher meaning and intention.") They also include short videos for each competency and a longer video that more deeply describes the district's vision with voices from multiple perspectives, including students.

Public Schools of the Tarrytowns' (NY) [Portrait of a Learner](#) includes interactivity, their district's mission and vision statements, along with priority strategic actions (e.g., "Create and deliver effective and timely communications to all stakeholders to support meaningful partnerships for inclusivity, achievement, and continuous student growth.") and links to versions in English and Spanish. They also differentiate between skills and dispositions in their Portraits, highlighting the role that Portraits can play in both shaping the skills students develop and the way students and districts approach learning, which are both a part of competency development.



11 Percent of Districts Provide Guidance for Implementation

BRIGHT SPOTS

[Milford School District](#) (NH) outlines how they will meet their objective that students demonstrate social emotional competencies in self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills by 2025, specifically, they will:

1. Engage diverse stakeholders in the program selection process.
2. Select materials/program for teachers to directly teach SEL skills.
3. Implement evidence-based SEL programs in the context of systemic district and school programming by dedicating time in the master schedule.
4. Collect data from multiple sources to identify a number of interventions related to SEL needs.
5. Implement student and staff surveys to gain a baseline measure of current culture.

Anaheim Elementary School District (CA) aligned district goals with their [Portrait of an AESD](#) scholar, including SEL as a key focus area alongside numeracy, literacy, and science. The SEL focus area includes explicit daily SEL instruction as well as integration opportunities and has an associated measure of achievement that corresponds to a specific percentage increase on a subset of the Panorama Student Survey. By connecting with other active policies, Portraits can leverage opportunities to connect with ongoing efforts. (Virginia's [Profile of a Virginia Graduate](#) similarly aligns their state Portrait with multiple content area standards.)



15 Percent of Districts Include Measurement Processes

BRIGHT SPOTS

Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools (NC) supports their [Portrait of a Graduate](#) implementation through their strategic plan. A milestone under their stated goal of “Creating a Culture of Safety and Wellness” includes using an SEL screener to show an increase in student favorable perceptions of student-teacher relationships, overall climate of school, and safety. [Des Moines Public Schools](#) (IA) combines Portrait of a Graduate competency and Transformative SEL metrics to speak to their priority of cultivating well-being. Their aspiration is that 100 percent of students and staff understand and implement the graduate profile and TSEL competencies and 100 percent of schools create peer to peer learning environments and track the data of the implementation.



5 Percent of Districts Include Developmental Milestones

BRIGHT SPOTS

Kettle Moraine's (WI) breaks their [Graduate Profile](#) into four grade bands (4K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12) and includes specific definitions and indicators of their competencies at each of these bands. [Ector County Independent School District](#) (TX) similarly defines their competencies across grade bands, using six grade bands throughout pre-K to twelfth grade.



5 Percent

of Districts Indicate Necessary School Support Systems

BRIGHT SPOTS

Winnetka SD 36's (IL) [Portrait](#) includes "Tenets of Progressive Education" that include a whole child approach, experiential and meaningful learning, and collaborative community. Cuba Independent School District's (NM) [Graduate Profile](#) details a "The Launch Pad," which is a set of "foundational experiences" from basic needs to educational opportunities that cultivate security, stability, safety, and freedom from fear.



5 Percent

of Districts Include a Portrait of an Educator

BRIGHT SPOTS

Northbrook/Glenview School District 30 (IL) includes both an [adult portrait](#) and a [school system portrait](#) alongside their [student Portrait](#) to define and showcase the role of educators, staff, and the broader school community in supporting student skill development. Anthony Wayne Local Schools includes [Instructional Practices](#) to support their [Portrait of a General](#) that provide concrete actions for instructors throughout planning, teaching, assessing, and reflecting.

IMPLEMENTATION FEATURES SUMMARY

We found that the vast majority of Portraits were user friendly and accessible for multiple audiences. Although this constitutes an important prerequisite for Portraits to be utilized, perhaps even more important is whether or not a district clarifies the environmental and instructional conditions necessary for students to develop the desired skills. Some districts have taken the more advanced step to provide guidance in this area: 11 percent offer implementation guidance, 15 percent indicate measurement or accountability processes, and 5 percent describe developmental progressions of skills across grade levels.

Increasing supports for effective implementation is a critical area of growth for Portraits as levers for systemic change and may include: aligning them with existing district frameworks and initiatives, integrating assessment and tracking strategies (Battelle for Kids, 2025; Dunbar et al., 2025), and linking skill development to work-based learning opportunities that provide authentic contexts for SEL (Discovery Education, 2025).

LEARNING DIRECTLY FROM DISTRICTS

To contextualize these findings, we had conversations with six district leaders across three districts to learn about the challenges of moving from vision to action. By understanding the challenges, we can identify approaches to address barriers. Two common themes emerged.

- 1. The Portrait effectively serves as a strong vision statement, and there is consensus that a clear next step is addressing measurement and accountability.** Many Portraits are positioned as a communication resource—a statement of commitment. Districts can benefit from a roadmap for changing student experiences and outcomes. One district leader explained how it’s all too easy for this work to get lost in the shuffle of competing demands and priorities when it isn’t explicitly connected to the district’s action plan and the data they are collecting. The inclusive community process of developing the Portrait should go a step further to define measurable goals and set a plan and timeline for implementation and evaluation to actualize the Portrait. In ongoing work, CASEL will continue to elevate district success stories in the specific areas of implementation and measurement to provide examples of how districts have overcome these challenges.
- 2. Leadership transitions risk Portrait sustainability in absence of collaboration.** When the Portrait’s sustainability is dependent on a specific department or leader, it tends to lose momentum during leadership changes or department restructuring. However, when broader collaboration is involved and invested in the work of designing and continuously improving implementation practices, the Portrait is better positioned to outlast district turnover. District leaders we spoke to found value in working with early adopters and champions, communicating about and “spreading” bright spots of implementation, and providing educators with professional learning options that prioritized their needs and interests and built relationships. Admittedly, it is a balancing act. The Portrait needs to be prioritized at the highest levels, while also ensuring a democratic uptake process and clear communication about how it connects to other priorities.

DISCUSSION

Portraits articulate the knowledge, skills, and mindsets that K-12, postsecondary, and business communities identify as essential for future readiness. Across more than 250 district Portraits of a Graduate, a consistent vision comes into focus for the competencies that young people need to thrive in college, career, and life. We identified and categorized the terms most frequently appearing in Portraits to illuminate common priorities for school districts across the country. While specific language varied, a clear pattern emerged: Districts are converging on a shared understanding that communication, adaptability, respect, critical thinking, and creativity, all of which align to CASEL’s five core SEL competencies, are indispensable for students’ readiness for the rapidly evolving world. These competencies not only prepare students for academic success but also equip them to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world. The findings point to the essential role of SEL in cultivating both the intra- and interpersonal competencies that employers consistently identify as critical to success in the modern workforce. This conclusion is reinforced by evidence that investment in programs that combine SEL and workforce-focused competency development is associated with positive outcomes in both areas, with SEL competencies correlating strongly with workforce readiness domains (The Urban Assembly, 2025).

There are clear benefits of integrating SEL to cultivate these competencies, including:

1. A robust evidence base on the connection between SEL and the development of social and emotional competencies (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011). Paired with resources that can help districts identify programs or approaches that best fit their local context, such as [CASEL's Guide to Evidence-Based Programming](#), districts can turn to approaches that have been evaluated and shown to positively affect the outcomes that they prioritize in their Portraits. Critically, this work is most effective when districts pair evidence-based programs with strong implementation supports, such as educator pre- and in-service training, ongoing coaching, and the use of data to strengthen practices over time.
2. SEL approaches have prompted the creation of assessments that are able to measure the competencies most frequently occurring across the Portraits. A number of the competencies highlighted across the Portraits have been identified by Inter-American Development Bank as strong targets for assessment, including problem-solving, critical thinking, and adaptability (“resilience”) based on their measurability (e.g., existing, high-quality assessments that districts could adopt), potential for growth, and meaningfulness for a variety of life outcomes (Oviedo et al., 2022). Assessment guidance, such as [EdTrust's Framework for District Leaders](#) and [Carnegie Foundation and ETS's newly released skills progressions](#), can help districts identify assessments that meet gold standard characteristics, such as reliability and validity, and fit the district's structures and practices for accountability and measurement.
3. SEL has grappled with the challenges of effective implementation and come through with clear recommendations. Success stories of SEL implementation provide a roadmap of best practices (Berman, 2023), which can be supported through myriad resources, including those outlined in CASEL's [District Resource Center](#) and [CASEL's Guide to Schoolwide SEL](#) (recently shown to accelerate the impact of SEL, particularly for early career educators; Domitrovich et al., 2025).

Additionally, a strong constellation of integrated SEL-supportive policies has been associated with school and classroom level SEL implementation (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024). Strengthening alignment across policies may involve integrating Portrait competencies into state assessments through crosswalks to academic standards, performance-based tasks, or revision of test items to emphasize higher-order thinking and problem-solving. Linking Portrait competencies to graduation requirements, college and career readiness standards, and/or competency-based learning frameworks further elevates the importance of SEL within systemic educational practice, helping to ensure that Portraits function as both aspirational visions and actionable roadmaps for student development. While it is important to note that these efforts may require significant time and resources to execute effectively, state and local leaders can further strengthen progress by partnering with businesses to create an integrative education-to-work pipeline that embeds SEL into classrooms and workforce development (Yoder et al., 2020), supported by policies and funding structures that expand access to programs and infrastructure, particularly for historically marginalized students (Atwell, 2023; Holzer, 2008).

Importantly, these findings should not be interpreted as suggesting a choice between SEL and academic or technical competency development. Rather, these domains are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. In today's technological landscape, this interconnection is even more vital. The competencies needed for the modern workforce increasingly include not only new technical capacities (such as programming) but also the ability to continually learn, adapt, and collaborate within evolving team structures (Atwell, 2023).

THE PATH FORWARD FOR PORTRAITS OF A GRADUATE

Taken together, these findings highlight that Portraits of a Graduate have the potential to offer a powerful framework for guiding the development of future-ready students. The Portrait's own future, and realization of impact, can lean on SEL to support implementation, measurement, and policy integration. We suggest that effective Portraits integrate social and emotional competencies with academic and technical competencies, scaffold and measure development across age-appropriate trajectories, and address equity to ensure all students have access to opportunities for growth. Their impact is likely to be greatest when they are user-friendly and accessible, and when bolstered by clear guidance for implementation, assessment, and environmental conditions that foster competency development. Alignment between state and district Portraits—coupled with policies, funding, and resources that help embed these competencies into classrooms and workforce pathways—further strengthens their potential to prepare students for the evolving demands of higher education, careers, and civic life (Terrell et al., 2025; Yoder et al., 2020). By connecting SEL's foundation of developmental and implementation science, Portraits can move from aspirational statements to actionable tools that help educators, families, and communities cultivate the flexible, human-centered competencies essential for student success in a rapidly changing world.

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