Systemic & Transformative SEL Towards Critical Well-Being:
The Role of the Superintendent

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Introduction

With the drumbeat for transforming schools getting louder, superintendents are at an inflection point. This is made more complex by ongoing conditions that keep systemic inequities in place as well as a rising mental health crisis amongst young people and adults. Teachers, in particular, are experiencing high levels of stress and burnout, resulting in many leaving the profession altogether (NEA, 2024). With teacher wellbeing and retention in crisis, coupled with inequitable student outcomes, expectations are high for superintendents to affect change. Superintendents, however, are not immune from ecological stressors and their wellbeing also needs attention.

Given the state of wellbeing in school systems, a humanistic approach is needed to buffer against the negative effects of current conditions. In recent years, implementing systemic social emotional learning (SEL) has been one way schools have responded to the wellbeing crisis. Some schools have included Transformative SEL (tSEL; Jagers et al., 2019) to ensure equity elaborations are embedded. While systemic SEL & tSEL (defined further below) have improved climate/culture and student outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2022; Mahoney et al., 2018), they are still fringe initiatives that are dependent on funding and staff "buy-in." Furthermore, the siloing of SEL/tSEL implementation from other change efforts (e.g., DEI, climate, etc.) fragments resources, promotes initiative fatigue, and is unsustainable. As such, a paradigm shift that centers Critical Well-Being (CWB), a humanistic approach that incorporates the promise of SEL/tSEL alongside critical consciousness and participatory engagement may be needed to transform systems. How superintendents understand their role in this new paradigm will have a significant impact on their organizational wellbeing.

This chapter explores the role of the superintendent within this paradigm shift. We acknowledge the complexity of the superintendency, uniqueness of organizations, and nuanced challenges faced by superintendents. Accordingly, this chapter is not intended to essentialize superintendents and their roles. Rather, our aim is to ignite curiosity and critical reflection for superintendents as they navigate wellbeing for themselves and their organizations. We start with a description of who we are and what has informed our work. Then, we define key terms that undergird this chapter. Next, we clarify why the superintendent's role matters. After that, we discuss the role of the superintendent from an ecological perspective and offer opportunities for reflection. Finally, we end with implications and recommendations.

Who We Are and What Has Informed Our Work

Our collective experiences researching, developing, facilitating, and leading change efforts across school systems have informed our current work and understanding of systemic transformation. Mai Xi's role as a district and statewide SEL leader has contributed to her understanding of systemic implementation and sustainability. Roberto's experience as a youth facilitator, researcher, and SEL expert have coalesced to inform the field of CWB. Specifically, Roberto's engagement with this topic is deeply rooted in his personal experience working with adolescents in out-of-school time programs, where he utilized strength-based, holistic, and culturally relevant pedagogical practices. Subsequently, Roberto's research with First Nations communities affirmed the importance of culturally sustaining and holistic well-being strategies, which he coined as Critical Well-Being (Rivera, 2021).

In our experience, even systemic and transformative SEL, which themselves have attempted to overcome some of the shortcomings of the early SEL framework, have nevertheless been vulnerable to a scarcity approach. A scarcity approach is characterized by under-staffing teams (e.g., a team of one "champion" expected to carry the load), insufficient resources (e.g., limited or no budget), unsustainable funding (e.g., use of limited-term dollars), and superficial support (e.g., espoused values versus enacted actions). The scarcity approach deems humanistic approaches, like tSEL and CWB, as temporary initiatives that are vulnerable to budget cuts and shifting priorities. This prevailing narrative, coupled with persistently limited resources, complex political dynamics, and high leadership turnover, promote a scarcity approach that relegates tSEL and CWB efforts to the fringe of educational priorities. This scarcity paradigm undermines tSEL and CWB, and delimits systemic transformation.

In contrast, adopting a CWB paradigm involves taking an asset-based approach which includes seeing and activating the community cultural wealth that lies within one's school community (Yosso, 2005). When superintendents implement tSEL with a CWB paradigm and clearly articulate their expectations for working together, they create space for meaningful stakeholder participation, welcoming diverse cultural perspectives and voices, which strengthens momentum and makes realistic system change possible. For example, Mai Xi's work accelerated when one superintendent decided to reconceptualize a two-day leadership institute to prioritize a *culture of care.* Senior leadership, including the superintendent, co-constructed the two days with the SEL team and actively participated alongside their leaders.This radical approach to pausing transactional activities and prioritizing personal wellbeing for leaders was unprecedented and effective. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with many leaders remarking how refreshing it was to feel cared for and to have no expectations other than to "breathe and take care of myself." As such, a superintendent's role is crucial to ameliorating the scarcity approach and improving organizational wellbeing.

Key Terms That Bolster Systemic & Transformative SEL Toward CWB

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Transformative SEL (tSEL). SEL is defined as the process through which adults and young people acquire and apply skills to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, show empathy, establish supportive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, n.d.). This is operationalized through five interacting competencies: *Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making*. The tSEL constructs are equity elaborations that expand on the competencies to focus on *Identity (Self-awareness), Agency (Self-management), Belonging (Social awareness), Collaborative problem-solving (Relationship skills) and Curiosity (Responsible decision-making)*. Beyond the specific construct additions, the key difference between SEL and tSEL is that whereas SEL is focused more on intra- and interpersonal relations, tSEL brings in more of a focus on students' civic responsibility, and standing up for others, especially in the face of unfairness and injustices (Jagers et al., 2021). Research indicates that SEL/tSEL can improve school climate, culture, academics, mental health, and prosocial skills (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2022; Mahoney et al., 2018).

Systemic and Transformative SEL. SEL practitioners generally understand systemic implementation to be a *wall-to-wall* approach where SEL is integrated into all organizational policies and practices. Systemic implementation consists of four areas: *Build foundational support and plan; Strengthen adult SEL competencies and capacity; Promote SEL for students; and Reflect on data for continuous improvement* (CASEL, n.d.). When implemented with

intentionality, these focus areas interact to maximize SEL development and outcomes for people, classrooms, schools and communities.

Transformative SEL implementation expands on systemic implementation to amplify conditions that are necessary for change. To shift conditions, transformative SEL implementation prioritizes the calibration of the right climate levers (i.e., *safety, connection, voice & leadership, and culturally responsive practices*), the right levers to transform the system (i.e., *partnerships, supports, capacities, structures & routines of SEL implementation*), and a foundation rooted in SEL and tSEL practices (i.e., *self-awareness-identity, self-management-agency, social awareness-belonging, relationship skills-collaborative problem solving, and responsible decision-making- curiosity*) (Shapiro et al., 2024). These calibrated levers and foundational roots enable a systemic *and* transformative SEL implementation that shifts conditions to improve student engagement, academic performance, and well-being so that students and adults can collectively thrive.

Critical Well-Being (CWB). CWB serves as a northstar for SEL and tSEL. Where SEL shines a light on the path for all and tSEL insists on a path that is equitable and inclusive, CWB seeks to counter systemic oppression and create the conditions for healing and wellbeing through three key tenets: *cultivating a beloved community, sustaining holistic well-being, and amplifying staff, youth, and community voice*. CWB emphasizes the need for safe and inclusive spaces for individuals to develop racial literacy, cultural awareness, and the ability to challenge dominant narratives through critical engagement (Paris & Alim, 2017; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011). Furthermore, CWB cultivates organizational collaboration and participatory engagement to establish culturally-sustaining policies and shared decision-making in order to ensure long-term changes to wellbeing efforts (Rivera, 2023). Through this humanistic approach to education, CWB nurtures an educational system that prioritizes personal and collective wellbeing as *a way of being*; and, an ecosystem that honors community assets and voice, leading to a more healthy, whole, and just society.

Why the Role of the Superintendent Matters

The superintendent's positional power and authority significantly impact systemic and transformative SEL toward CWB. Superintendents lead, shape, and inspire district culture, policies, and strategies, and can set the tone for systemic and transformative change (CASEL, 2020). A superintendent's support can significantly influence the success or failure of tSEL and CWB. Although the students in a district may often not even know who their superintendent is, teachers and principals certainly will, and the culture and attitudes that they convey day-to-day in the classroom and school hallways will be a reflection, at least in part, of the superintendent's communications, directives, and most importantly, *way of being* when inhabiting their role.

Superintendent capacity and influence may buffer against the scarcity approach. Superintendents can work with their board and executive cabinet to embed tSEL & CWB into organizational policies and practices, including budget allocation, and core academic and climate/culture goals. Superintendents can engage their communities in a continuous cycle of quality improvement and hold the system accountable for moving the needle on the cultural shifts needed for authentic and sustainable change.

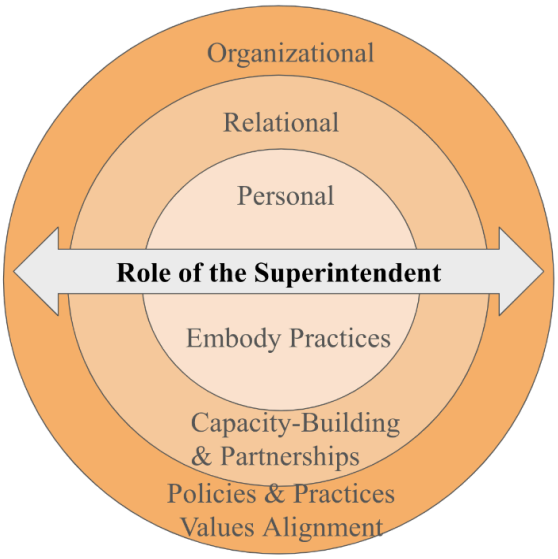
More importantly, superintendents set the tone for their organizational health and wellbeing. As organizational leaders, the community looks to their superintendents for reassurance, guidance, and support. In particular, during stressful times, the community relies on the superintendent to embody authentic vulnerability and model emotional intelligence. While

these expectations may place undue stress on the superintendent to be all things to all people, they are important reminders of the significance and critical hope endemic to the role, the value of authentic and humanistic leadership, and the critical need for superintendents to attend to their own wellbeing.

A Humanistic and Ecological Approach to the Superintendent's Role

Applying an ecological systems lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) helps to elucidate how superintendents are situated within systems and how they interact to support humanizing systemic and transformative SEL toward CWB. In this section, we describe the embodied stance and practices that support wellbeing at the personal level, the capacity-building and partnerships necessary for systemic and transformative implementation at the relational level, and the importance of values alignment at the organizational level. Figure 1 conceptualizes this approach.

Figure 1
The Role of the Superintendent Across an Ecological System



Note: Author created.

Superintendents Embody Critical Well-Being

Superintendents humanize and operationalize systemic and transformative SEL by embodying CWB. One way superintendents can embody CWB is by doing regular P.I.E.S check-ins with staff (where everyone, including the superintendent, shares how they are doing *physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually*), which can be done one on one or in small groups. Mai Xi and Roberto have done this with county, district, and school leaders, and have heard that something this simple signals integrity, vulnerability, and authenticity while humanizing the leadership team. In addition, Roberto has worked with superintendents who have gathered leadership teams together and engaged in personal storytelling on topics such as a time one has demonstrated courage, vision, strength, or compassion. Further, engaging leaders to identify their community cultural wealth has been instrumental in developing a sense of

collective agency in the work Mai Xi and Roberto have done. These types of *intentional* activities and prompts, when shared with vulnerability, can lead to fostering a sense of beloved community where rather than having the solutions all of the time, the superintendent models and embodies leading with humanity and leveraging strengths to take critical risks collectively.

Embodying Critical Well-Being (CWB) paves the way for a paradigm shift grounded in critical consciousness and critical hope, both of which are essential for enacting meaningful change. As Prilleltensky (2008) notes, power and well-being are deeply interconnected: those who hold power are often able to meet their well-being needs in culturally relevant ways, while marginalized groups frequently experience diminished well-being as a result of systemic exclusion and injustice. These conditions hinder their ability to effectively meet their own needs. By deepening critical consciousness, superintendents are better positioned to examine their role in advancing well-being, interrogate their own power and privilege, and embody values that foster collective thriving. Moreover, an embodied approach to CWB creates space for engaging in critical hope, envisioning a more just and equitable future while simultaneously working to dismantle oppressive systems (Bishundat et al., 2018). Superintendents may consider fortifying their CWB embodied practices with these reflections:

- *Why does my personal wellbeing matter for others?*
- *What dead end beliefs do I have that continue to hold the problems of inequities in place? Am I willing to be uncomfortable while I examine those areas?*
- *What are the critical issues facing my school-community and what are the collective cultural assets that are present that could address these issues?*

Superintendents Build Capacity and Partnerships Toward CWB

Shifting toward Critical Well-Being (CWB) requires superintendents to be intentional in building capacity and fostering partnerships. CWB promotes a holistic approach to well-being (emotional, physical, spiritual, and cognitive) and calls for alignment between internal systems (e.g., policies and resources) and external collaborations with community-based organizations (Rivera, 2023). One practice for superintendents to build capacity with their systemic leaders is through a mapping activity using a medicine wheel. This activity utilizes a diagram of the medicine wheel (a circle with four quadrants), with each quadrant representing mental, emotional, physical, or spiritual well being. From here leaders can engage their teams in a mapping activity where they identify all of a district's initiatives, departments, and efforts and collectively map them onto some aspect of the medicine wheel representing wellbeing. By viewing initiatives such as SEL, DEI, curriculum and instruction, and trauma-informed work as interconnected and unified in bolstering collective wellbeing, superintendents can strengthen organizational capacity by aligning respective priorities, towards the same goal of wellbeing. Where gaps exist, cross-sector partnerships can deepen support for educators, students, and families (Warren, 2005). The following section highlights two humanizing models of capacity-building: the Native American Community Academy (NACA) and California's CalHOPE Student Support.

At NACA, leaders mapped all departments, initiatives, and efforts towards supporting staff, student, and parents/caregivers cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs and where gaps existed, they partnered with youth and parents in identifying community-based organizations that could meet these needs in culturally relevant ways. As a result of these efforts, 33% of NACA staff are alumni of the school, and the school has become a national model for

academic achievement. Highlighting the impact of these efforts, research indicates that ensuring educators' basic needs are met in culturally grounded ways can help mitigate burnout, enhance engagement, and foster resilience (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018; Kohli et al., 2022). In summary, Roberto (2021) found that co-constructing an equitable education system required systems leaders to engage staff in aligning intra-institutional initiatives, and collaborating with youth and communities in identifying and connecting with relevant community organizations as partners.

The CalHOPE project leverages capacity-building and cross-sector partnerships to transform systemic SEL/tSEL. Through CalHOPE, 56 of CA's 58 county offices of education (COE) are engaging in monthly communities of practice (CoP) where they regularly learn, network, collaborate, and share resources. The CalHOPE CoP is bolstered by a logic model that seeks to shift systemic conditions in order to improve engagement, performance, and wellbeing for adults and students towards collectivist thriving (Shapiro et al., 2023). Through a robust research and practice partnership with UC Berkeley, CalHOPE partners regularly engage in a continuous feedback loop to collect, analyze, translate, and make meaning of data in order to improve practice and inform the field. Some early indicators point to improvements in adult SEL (i.e., improvements in *teacher attitudes, mindsets, efficacy, skills, and knowledge* following the SEL Foundations Course), leadership capacity to implement systemic SEL structures and routines, and student outcomes for chronic absenteeism (CalHOPE Chronic Absenteeism, December 2024; Duane et al., 2025b). Teachers are also finding healing through CoP participation, as exemplified by this feedback:

> The SEL seminars [CoPs] were so amazing; a fantastic opportunity to network with other like-minded individuals from around the area. Of special note were the Empathy Interviews, Dimensions of Belonging, Walk and Talks, info about implementing school-wide SEL, and from the final session, Flash Consultancy. On a personal note, I was the person presenting the problem for the Flash Consult, and my two listeners were exceptionally adept at breaking down my problem and allowing me to reach my own decision. This was so meaningful to me as my mother had just passed away and I needed clarity on speaking with authenticity, with my own voice, at her memorial service, which was the very next day. Through this process, I was able to sit right there after our seminar [CoP] and write out my speech (which granted had been percolating in my head for days, but after the Flash Consult, I was grounded enough to get it all down on paper!). Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important work (S. Oettle, personal communication, April 8, 2025).

Through capacity-building and partnerships, superintendents can improve systemic and transformative SEL implementation toward CWB. Superintendents may consider how they are:

- Engaging with diverse partnerships across educational and non-educational spaces *(Example: Cross-sector partnerships between education, healthcare, higher education, and county leaders)*
- Allocating and communicating resources to support SEL/tSEL implementation *(Example: An accessible digital and turnkey-ready compendium of resources)*
- Developing the capacities (beliefs, attitudes, skills, efficacy, mindsets) of educators across all systems *(Example: Humanizing practices that support personal and collective wellbeing)*
- Establishing structures and routines of SEL implementation *(Example: A community of practice dedicated to wellbeing)*

Superintendents Align Values to Practice

Aligning values to policies/practices deepens and authenticates the work of tSEL and CWB. Aligned values and practices can garner trust, confidence, and promote sustainability. Conversely, stakeholders detect very quickly when values and practices do not align, and the broken trust from such ruptures is not regained easily, taking resources and time to rebuild.

One way that superintendents can align values to practice is by setting clear expectations about their humanizing intentions. These clear expectations are actualized through regular communication, resource & budget allocations to support the work, and intentionally integrating into organizational practices. For example, the CalHOPE Student Support community of practice was actualized through initial seed funding from the Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) superintendent, whose ongoing support can be seen through the development of a statewide SEL leadership and technical support team. At SCOE, SEL is regularly communicated regionally and statewide, and practices are integrated into meetings and learning spaces, including leadership team meetings.

In addition, superintendents may also leverage personal practice to activate tSEL and CWB. Personal practice involves actively engaging with diverse partnerships and co-constructing CWB together. To actualize this approach, superintendents may initiate multi-partnership convenings (e.g., parents, young people, staff, community members, and leaders) to dialogue about what matters to them, including values and assets intrinsic to community/cultural groups and what wellbeing means to them. These co-constructed conversations should be dynamic and generative with all participants sharing power and voice. These initial CWB conversations can become synergistic spaces of care, connection, and wellness, which can expand to be spaces of solution-building and working through emerging community tensions. Research supports this approach—youth participatory action research (YPAR), for instance, has been effective in empowering students to shape systemic policies related to mental health and well-being by aligning district, school, and community efforts with meaningful, stakeholder-driven data (Rivera, 2023; Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024). Through these intentional, participatory practices, school systems can move toward sustained, equity-driven transformation that centers well-being, cultural responsiveness, and collective agency.

Implications

There are several implications to enact change with systemic and transformative SEL and CWB. Prioritization toward sustainability is one implication. Given varying and persistent needs (e.g., teacher shortage, mental health crisis, chronic absenteeism, and achievement gaps), superintendents will have to decide which issues receive priority. What superintendents prioritize and embody may have implications for sustainability and systems transformation. This priority is made more complicated with leadership attrition and diminishing resources. A second implication is how superintendents navigate humanizing systems in the face of increasing polarization, toxic discourse, and socio-political tensions. Schools are microcosms of the harmful effects of socio-environmental and socio-political strife, and communities will look to the superintendent for reassurance and care. How superintendents navigate these tensions will have tremendous implications for personal, relational, and organizational wellbeing, particularly for marginalized families, students, and staff. Finally, there are implications for the role of tSEL and CWB in education. Amid a growing mental health crisis, superintendents may need to rethink traditional definitions of school success. This shift creates an opportunity to embrace a (CWB) paradigm that centers authentic stakeholder voice and participation. While such redefinition may

challenge existing structures, it offers the potential to humanize education and establish a sustainable, shared leadership model beyond any one leader's tenure.

Recommendations

In the spirit of future dreaming and critical hope, we offer these practical recommendations to support healing and humanizing educational systems and conditions (with specific attention to our front-line teachers):

- Prioritize people over content. If leaders and teachers are unwell, they cannot care for students. If students are unwell, they cannot learn and a cycle of disparate outcomes persists.
    - Co-construct ongoing healing spaces *WITH* teachers.
- Integrate into academics. Emphasize the *HOW (classroom routines, relationships, culturally-responsive practices, etc.)*. The revised 2024 California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP) provides a good example.
    - Incorporate wellbeing practices into teachers' daily classroom routines.
- Cultivate diverse partnerships, including healthcare and universities that may be better resourced to support humanizing structures.
    - Leverage local health and sports organizations to support teacher wellbeing.
- Use an asset-based approach to honor the cultural and community wealth that already exists in your community.
    - Conduct empathy interviews and focus groups to learn about the cultural and community wealth that your teachers have.
- Enact the duality of critical hope- interrogate systemic inequities AND re-imagine a better way of being at the same time.
    - Maximize meetings to build relationships, collaborate, and co-dream a better way of being for teachers.
- Practice a stance of curiosity by inviting opportunities for CWB coaching and support, personally and organizationally.
    - Provide affinity spaces and journey-partnerships for teachers.

Conclusion

Superintendents are well-positioned to adopt a paradigm shift and support a humanistic approach to education. Through embodied leadership, superintendents can model a human-centered approach toward CWB and deepen their capacity to care for their organizations. Embodied practices, however, are just starting points toward systemic and transformative change. In order to promote trust and confidence, superintendents will need to align CWB values to intentional actions. Furthermore, a humanistic approach to education requires collective action, and this means superintendents must leverage cross-sector partnerships to build capacity across their organizations. Finally, in order to actualize the promise of SEL, tSEL and CWB, superintendents will need to liberate themselves from the hero complex and shift toward a paradigm of host leadership in order to enact change (Wheatley & Frieze, 2010). This paradigm shift requires superintendents and their communities to leverage the cultural and communal wealth that already exists, and work to co-construct a better future together.

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