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Seeking Balance in the Provision of Technical Assistance

Insights from the National Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety

The process through which an organization receives support to build capacity and improve the quality or effectiveness of particular programs, practices, or policies is called *technical assistance* (Dunst et al., 2019a; West et al., 2012). Ample research has demonstrated that individual and organizational capacity and capacity building are key components to successful implementation of district and school improvement efforts, their scaling, and their sustainability (Darling-Hammond and Ball, 1998; Elmore, 2002; Honig, 2003; Mintrop, 2003; O'Day, 2002). Accordingly, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) funds various types of technical assistance centers with the goal of providing the expertise and resources needed by state education agencies (SEAs), regional education agencies, and local education agencies (LEAs) to effectively implement federal education programs (ED, 2021a; ED, 2021b).

Although technical assistance is a core strategy used by ED to improve the effectiveness and quality of programs, practice, and policy, it remains somewhat conceptually underspecified. Researchers have, however, tried to understand the key aspects of the technical assistance process and have identified common features when examining frameworks found in extant research (see Dunst et al., 2019a; Dunst et al., 2019b). These features include an organization's preparation for receiving support (e.g., needs assessment, organizational buy-in); establishing a plan for the technical assistance (e.g., a theory of change, clearly defined staff roles and responsibilities); practices used by providers in the implementation of technical assistance (e.g., consultation, professional development); common approaches to evaluating the support provided; and the processes or procedures for ensuring the changes brought about by the support are sustainable (Dunst et al., 2019a; Dunst et al., 2019b).

ED's established Comprehensive Centers have also demonstrated common operational practices (Turnbull et al., 2010; Weinstock et al., undated). Although some centers focus generally

on the needs of SEAs and LEAs in set geographical regions (e.g., Regional Education Laboratories [RELs]), other centers provide support focused on a particular content area (e.g., the Student Engagement and Attendance Center, focused on reducing chronic absenteeism) and serve SEAs and LEAs across the United States. Indeed, a majority of the Comprehensive Centers expanded the topic areas on which intended supports focus, responding to explicit requests from state recipients or to emerging needs that were recognized during the provision of planned support (Turnbull, 2010). Their support strategies, too, take on many formats, such as providing research syntheses, training events or professional development sessions, conferences, and peer networking (Turnbull et al., 2010). Strategies selected for the provision of support are informed, in part, by the intensity of the assistance provided, in which basic levels of support use fewer resources (e.g., shared research syntheses, open-access webinars) and more-in-depth supports leverage more resource-intensive strategies (e.g., a peer network, tailored consulting) (Blase, 2009).

 In addition to managing the complexity around the topics and format of support, technical assistance centers must make challenging decisions about how much support they provide and to whom. For example, many ED Comprehensive Centers have turned down requests for support, often because the requested assistance fell outside the center's scope of work or topic area, but also because the centers had to consider the best use of limited resources (Turnbull et al., 2010). Support providers need to be aware of their resource constraints and ensure that they appropriately balance the desire to provide a breadth of coverage with the intensity of supports that may be needed by recipients to achieve the desired changes (Mitchell, Florin, and Stevenson, 2002). That is to say that too many activities focused on providing broad supports to a wide audience may limit the capacity of an organization to provide deeper support where such intensity is needed to produce the intended outcomes, and vice versa.

Technical assistance centers often draw upon collaboration with their support recipients and other organizations to manage these tensions. ED's established Comprehensive Centers often collaborate with other federally funded centers and technical assistance providers outside the Comprehensive Center system as a key strategy for providing support (Weinstock et al., undated). Collaborations have been used to identify and prioritize state needs and

to partner for the delivery of supports, leveraging the expertise or networks of other centers to expand the reach of their own (Turnbull et al., 2010; Weinstock et al., undated). The centers also codeveloped work plans with the states that would be supported, and these plans evolved over time (Turnbull et al., 2010; Weinstock et al., undated).

As the literature demonstrates, providing and using technical assistance is a complex endeavor, presenting tensions among various aspects of support provision. Additional research is needed to understand how provider organizations balance these resource demands to create their portfolio of work. In 2018, ED funded the development of a new national technical assistance center, CISELSS (ED, 2018a).[1] CISELSS's charge is to provide technical assistance and support to SEAs and LEAs on SEL and school safety and to support the implementation of related district and school policies, programs, and practices. We leverage CISELSS's early implementation years as a unique case study of how a center develops its portfolio of work and balances multiple demands.

Research Questions and Analytic Overview

Given the complexity of technical assistance for both providers and recipients, understanding technical assistance provision requires a deeper and more nuanced examination of (1) how recipients use, combine, align, and manage sources of support and (2) how providers design, adjust, and coordinate the support provided directly and in collaboration. Therefore, we seek to address the following questions:

1. How do technical assistance recipients combine and manage various sources of support for SEL and school safety?
2. How does CISELSS's provision of resources, support, and technical assistance balance competing pressures and meet changing contextual demands?

Our analyses are guided by a conceptual framework of balance, discussed in the next section, which illuminates how CISELSS made decisions to address competing pressures, client needs, and shifting contextual conditions during its first three

years. We use data from interviews (n = 16 in 2020; n = 21 in 2021) with CISELSS staff, leaders at external partner organizations,[2] and technical assistance recipients; feedback form data (n = 59 in 2020; n = 353 in 2021) from individuals who engaged with CISELSS; and artifacts and documentation. We analyzed interview data through a process of iterative coding, memoing, and using analytic matrices to uncover patterns. We used descriptive analyses to summarize feedback form responses.

Importantly, this study examines a single, federally funded technical assistance center from its launch to the halfway point of its third year of operation, during a global pandemic and period of historic racial reckoning, with a particular content area focus (i.e., SEL and school safety). Each of these factors inevitably influenced the decisions made by CISELSS staff and the types of supports CISELSS was able to provide (e.g., in-person versus virtual supports). We did not interview all individuals associated with CISELSS, and the perspectives shared during interviews may not reflect those of all CISELSS staff, technical assistance recipients, or external partner organizations and organizations in the SEL ecosystem. Similarly, the feedback forms had a low response rate (i.e., 18 percent in 2020 and 10 percent in 2021). Given the anonymous nature of the feedback, we are unable to weight responses in ways that might better reflect the full scope of CISELSS's technical assistance recipients. We provide more information about the data sources, analytic methods, and limitations of this study in the appendix.

Abbreviations

CCSSO	Council of Chief State School Officers
CISELSS	Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
ED	U.S. Department of Education
FY	fiscal year
LEA	local education agency
NCSI	National Center for Systemic Improvement
REL	Regional Education Laboratory
SEA	state education agency
SEL	social and emotional learning
TAL	Technical Assistance Liaison

Given the scope of our focus and the data limitations, the results of our analyses likely have limited generalizability. Therefore, the purpose of this report is to provide policymakers and technical assistance providers and recipients with an analysis of how a federally funded technical assistance center balances competing pressures amid unexpected challenges so that it can address the needs of its clients and fulfill its charge. Moreover, this report provides CISELSS with insights about its early implementation efforts and might help guide CISELSS's ongoing provision of support.

In what follows, we present the conceptual framework that we used to guide our analysis, and we describe CISELSS and its approach to technical assistance, including examples of support provided. Then, we present our findings from CISELSS's early years, including a discussion of the moves CISELSS made to find balance between breadth and depth of intensity, expertise, and technical assistance content; flexibility, responsiveness, and structure of its technical assistance approach and topics; and partnership and ownership in the provision of support. We discuss the influence of contextual conditions on these strategic moves. Finally, we reflect upon our results and the implications they hold for CISELSS's ongoing efforts to find balance and meet its charge as a federally funded technical assistance center.

Conceptual Framework: Balance

Echoing the literature on the complex and multifaceted nature of technical assistance, initial observations of the design and establishment of CISELSS surfaced common tensions in establishing its portfolio of support. Technical assistance centers may weigh common tensions and trade-offs: the extent to which the center should focus its expertise and support on a small number of topics in great depth or a broad array of topics at the surface level; the extent to which the center should aim to serve many organizations through general supports or focus resources on deeper supports to fewer organizations; the extent to which the center should develop consistent structures for the mode and content of support or whether the

center should remain flexible in its structure and focus on responsiveness to current events and emergent needs; and the extent to which the center should leverage partnerships to meet recipient needs and expand the center's reach or maintain ownership of its technical assistance work and focus within its own network. These tensions play out within the dynamic context of changing political and policy environments, a fixed amount of funding, and an existing ecosystem of technical assistance providers.

We developed a conceptual framework that draws on technical assistance research and the early experiences of CISELSS to guide our analysis of how CISELSS manages these tensions and complexities when providing technical assistance. This framework is not normative in nature; there are multiple approaches to providing technical assistance and establishing balance. We conceptualize the provision of technical assistance as dynamic and contextually dependent. What works for one technical assistance provider may not work for another, and what is appropriate during an organization's early years might not work over the lifespan of that organization. This heuristic framework brings into focus the trade-offs and benefits of different approaches, strategies, and moves in the provision of technical assistance.

As shown in Figure 1, we conceptualize balance using the visualization of a lever centered upon a fulcrum. This lever, or scale, represents the resources and technical assistance provided by CISELSS. Upon this lever are balanced competing weights—of breadth versus depth of intensity, expertise, and technical assistance content; flexibility and responsiveness versus structure in the technical assistance approach and topics; and partnership versus ownership in the provision of technical assistance.[3] Of course, these weights and counterweights are also deeply interconnected because working in partnership with another organization may facilitate the broadening of available expertise, or structured technical assistance may narrow the breadth of content. We also think of these weights as adjusting in response to shifts in the fulcrum's position along the lever. Contextual conditions, such as budget constraints, CISELSS's warrant as a federal technical center, a global pandemic, and a period of historic racial reckoning, exert pressure on the

FIGURE 1
Conceptual Framework Representing CISELSS's Efforts to Find Balance
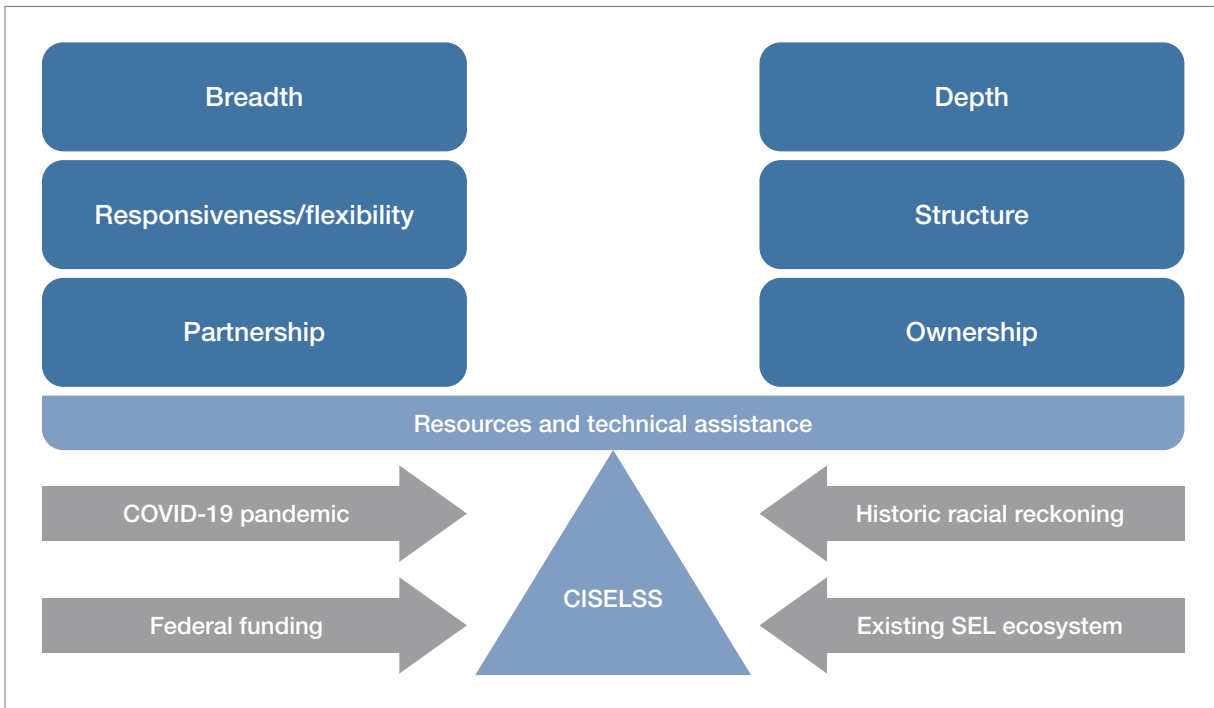
fulcrum, potentially requiring shifts to the weights upon the lever. In order for CISELSS to remain balanced, it may need to shift the portfolio of supports that it offers at any given point in time. We use this framework to explore the ways in which CISELSS adjusted the supports that it provided over the course of its first three years, examining how and to what extent CISELSS has balanced conflicting priorities.

Establishment and Technical Assistance Approach

CISELSS, first launched in October 2018, is led by WestEd in partnership with Transforming Education, CCSSO, and the RAND Corporation.[4] CISELSS is charged with enhancing the capacity of (1) SEAs to support their LEAs and (2) LEAs to support their schools. CISELSS is encouraged and expected to collaborate with other provider organizations in its provision of technical assistance, especially other federally funded centers (e.g., Title IV Part A–funded centers, Comprehensive Centers).[5] ED funded CISELSS with a budget of 1 million dollars annually for up to five years. For comparison,

CISELSS's five-year operational budget is smaller than the annual budget of some ED content centers (see ED, 2018b).

CISELSS partners spent much of CISELSS's first year (fiscal year [FY] 2019) focused on building the internal partnership and establishing CISELSS's vision for SEL and school safety technical assistance. This work included identifying focal areas (discussed next), building relationships with other technical assistance providers, and creating connections with SEAs and LEAs in need of support. CISELSS provided a few webinars in FY 2019, including a public introduction of the organization (May 2019) and an overview of its five focal areas (July 2019); its more in-depth technical assistance launched in FY 2020 (i.e., Year 2).

CISELSS partners conducted a targeted needs assessment in the first year of operation to identify the field's most-pressing SEL and school safety needs and to guide CISELSS's initial areas of focus.[6] This process included one-on-one and small group conversations with researchers, service providers, and practitioners at various levels of the education system. The process also included reviews of existing SEL and school safety literature and a short questionnaire admin-

istered to educators regarding current and evolving areas of need. CISELSS identified five focal areas through this process: equity, integration, alignment and coherence, data-driven cycles of improvement, and sustainable implementation. These priorities became the basis for CISELSS's work. In the box that follows, we provide information from CISELSS about how these focal areas are characterized.

CISELSS also had to determine how technical assistance would be organized to address these needs. CISELSS focuses on three tiers of technical assistance. The first, or General, tier is conceived to serve the broadest audience and consists of professional learning opportunities (e.g., webinars), reports, tools, protocols, and state data profiles developed by CISELSS staff in partnership with subject-matter experts. This tier also includes a growing inventory of curated resources pro-

duced by other organizations, including videos, tools, and publications. These resources live on CISELSS's website, which was accessed over 7,000 times between May 2020 and April 2021. CISELSS's publication *Integrating Social and Emotional Learning Throughout the School System: A Compendium of Resources for District Leaders* (Buckley, 2020) is an example of Tier 1 technical assistance. This compendium includes resources for LEA leaders who are interested in implementing evidence-based supports to ensure SEL is fully integrated into the educational experience that schools provide. In Year 3, other Tier 1 briefs, reports, and webinars addressed topics such as connecting teacher practice with SEL and cultivating individual resilience.

The second, or Targeted, tier includes CISELSS's state collaboratives for SEAs and their partner agencies (e.g., Health and Human Services, Public Safety),

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CISELSS's Five Areas of Focus

CISELSS describes the five focal areas that guide its work as follows:

Equity. The field shared a need for support with infusing equity into the work of adopting SEL and school safety programs and practices, and with ensuring equity in learning environments, in access to supports, and in disciplinary practices. While the concept of education equity warrants its own focus area, equity is also at the heart of the other four focus areas.

Integration. The field needs clear connections between SEL and school safety and academic outcomes. Additionally, the field is asking for more support in the integration of SEL and school safety efforts into the everyday work of educating children, including infusing them into academic teaching and learning (including curriculum, instructional approaches, and formative assessment) and into school and classroom climates for teaching and learning.

Alignment and Coherence. [CISELSS]'s needs sensing revealed that SEL and school safety can be misaligned with other whole-child initiatives or with related goals and policies set at the state, district, and school levels.

Data-driven Cycles of Improvement. Just as school systems commonly implement cycles of instructional improvement to support academic outcomes, educators are increasingly interested in understanding how measuring SEL, school climate, and school safety can be used in a formative way to improve the way students are served. There is a need for support with measuring SEL to support continuous improvement in the way educators serve their students.

Sustainable Implementation. Needs sensing also illuminated a need for effective and sustainable implementation of evidence-based programs and practices. SEL and school safety programs and practices have been linked to a variety of positive short- and long-term outcomes; yet, many practitioners find that their own use of such programs or practices does not yield the kind of significant results described in the evidence base.

SOURCE: CISELSS, undated.

to work on a shared problem of practice that holds relevance for the broader field of education. CISELSS initially launched two state collaboratives—one on strategic communication and another on student well-being and safety. Over time, the two state collaboratives became less distinct, and both shifted their focus toward coherence and alignment and strategic communications. The focus on coherence and alignment was to ensure that state-level policy, practices, and resources across the spectrum of SEL, school safety, and whole child initiatives work in concert rather than in competition to meet the needs of students. The focus on strategic communication was to help SEAs develop a plan to convey their model and initiatives for addressing SEL and align whole child supports within their SEA or to their LEAs. Each state team, of which there are ten, is assigned a CISELSS staff member—a Technical Assistance Liaison (TAL)—who supports that team in addressing their problem of practice. Collaborative members are engaged in regular meetings and check-ins and in-person and virtual convenings, and they are provided with additional tools and resources as needed.[7] As part of their engagement in these state collaboratives, some of the state teams piloted an exemplars protocol (see Caparas, 2021)[8] or an alignment and coherence protocol—one for SEAs and one for LEAs (see Walrond and Romer, 2021; Walrond, 2021).[9] The external partner organization Be Clear assisted state teams focusing on strategic communications in the process of developing a concrete communications plan. Additional support provided to the state collaborative members included a webinar with a discussion of the potential hazards of perpetuating disparities or inequities when using social, emotional, and behavioral screening tools.

The third, or Intensive, tier of technical assistance was initially conceptualized as working in extended partnership with two or three SEAs and/or LEAs to design and implement strategies and initiatives related to CISELSS's priorities. Over time, Tier 3 technical assistance evolved into supporting the SEL and school safety needs of individual SEAs and LEAs through one-on-one consulting engagements aimed at building capacity for the recipient agency to lead and sustain the work. Examples of Tier 3 support include facilitating a recipient's community of practice gathering, designing state- or region-specific trainings and presentations, and curating resources on requested topics. Similar to Tier 2 supports, Tier 3 work is intended to yield insights and effective practices to be disseminated to the broader field as part of CISELSS's Tier 1 supports.

Finally, as stated earlier, CISELSS is encouraged and expected to partner with external organizations to expand its reach.[10] CISELSS's partnerships span all three tiers of technical assistance. These partnerships are two-way streets; CISELSS asks external organizations to help address identified needs for its clients and CISELSS is asked to support other organizations in their technical assistance efforts (e.g., presenting or being on a panel, conducting a consultation on SEL-related needs). In Year 3, CISELSS collaborated with the National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) to publish a Tier 1 resource on integrating social and emotional well-being and academic excellence in schools (see Folsom et al., 2021), and CISELSS staff presented a keynote for NCSI's state collaboratives. CISELSS also partnered with REL West, two Regional Comprehensive Centers, and external experts from other centers, nonprofits, and school districts. These partnerships resulted in the development of many of CISELSS's Tier 1 resources, including webinars and videos. External experts were also invited to speak at state collaborative convenings and to support state collaborative teams.

Insights from the Early Years

Our findings are organized by our two guiding questions. First, we examine how the recipients of technical assistance from CISELSS accessed, managed, and combined various sources of support around SEL and school safety. This analysis indicates that technical assistance recipients combined support from several providers and that CISELSS played an important role in collaborating and aligning technical assistance with other providers in the ecosystem. Next, we describe the trade-offs and choices CISELSS faced in seeking to balance multiple priorities. We found that CISELSS acted dynamically to adjust its balance of breadth and depth; flexibility, responsiveness, and structure; and partnership and ownership of the

technical assistance provided across the different tiers of support. Significant contextual conditions, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the period of historic racial reckoning, appeared to substantially influence the balance across these areas.

How Do Technical Assistance Recipients Combine and Manage Various Sources of Support for Social Emotional Learning and School Safety?

We were interested to learn whether and how SEAs access technical assistance from a variety of sources to meet their needs and better serve students. We found that some technical assistance recipients who responded to our feedback form—and most technical assistance recipients who participated in interviews—reported combining the technical assistance from CISELSS with other supports to achieve their goals. Interestingly, it appeared that CISELSS played an important role in bridging support across topics and technical assistance providers.

On our feedback form, approximately one-third of SEA and LEA staff respondents reported engaging with more than one provider for SEL and school safety technical assistance. Respondents reported engaging, on average, 1.8 providers over the past three years, with a range of one to eight providers, for SEL and school safety technical assistance. Staff from SEAs reported, on average, engaging 2.1 organizations for their SEL and/or school safety technical assistance, and staff from LEAs reported engaging, on average, 1.7 organizations. We also explored whether respondents' answers varied based on the

Technical assistance recipients affirmed the need for both broad and deep provider expertise.

tier of CISELSS support they received. On average, Tier 2 recipients and Tier 3 recipients reported engaging more organizations than Tier 1 recipients did.[11] Although Tier 2 and Tier 3 recipients engaged an average of 3.5 and 2.9 organizations respectively, Tier 1 recipients engaged an average of 1.6 organizations. This suggests that educators who engage in CISELSS-provided technical assistance, especially deeper, more-tailored supports, are combining support from multiple providers to meet their organization's SEL and school safety needs.

Some sources of support were commonly combined. In our interviews, most Tier 2 recipients shared that they also participated in a parallel state collaborative, operated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, to build and implement statewide SEL competencies or standards. Other technical assistance providers that our interviewees engaged for SEL and/or school safety support include the Regional Comprehensive Centers, RELs, and organizations focused on school mental health and implementing the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports framework. Of note, the two Tier 3 technical assistance recipients whom we interviewed did not mention any other significant sources of technical assistance around school safety or SEL.

SEAs engage in several different strategies to manage sources of support. Two state collaborative members described the importance of communicating with their various technical assistance providers about all of their different streams of work related to SEL. For example, one interviewee notified CISELSS staff that their state was working with different organizations, and CISELSS staff then reached out to the other organizations to clarify roles. The state collaborative member stated,

> And so, we did try to make a point of making sure everyone knew about each other in the space and tried to be considerate of everyone's support . . . making sure no one was running over each other or causing conflicts. So, that's how we approached it, which was to be very clear who was doing what, and everyone had a different role that could be complementary.

In most cases, the different technical assistance providers had different foci and scopes of work,

which prevented the work from conflicting. More than half of the state collaborative interviewees noted that support around statewide SEL competencies provided by other organizations fit well with CISELSS's support, which focused on alignment, strategic communication, or whole-child approaches.

Interviewees also stated that work structures within their organizations supported alignment across the work of multiple technical assistance providers. For example, in one state, all individuals working with the various technical assistance providers are part of a single internal team, so they can create greater alignment and coherence through internal collaboration. Another interviewee shared that, because she is the main person managing issues related to trauma and SEL within her SEA, she can ensure greater alignment among the various providers within her work. Although the modes and content of support varied across providers, interviewees expressed that the work of other technical assistance organizations complemented their work with CISELSS and that interviewees benefited from integrating and aligning SEL support from multiple organizations.

CISELSS also found a unique space in which to contribute by connecting SEL, school safety, and related work. For example, two interviewees articulated that the value-add or unique role that CISELSS plays in the SEL technical assistance ecosystem is that CISELSS provides support in connecting SEL and school safety. Several interviewees also reported relying on CISELSS for support on topics relating to strategic communications and alignment across whole-child initiatives. While one interviewee explicitly stated that her CISELSS TAL combines school safety and a trauma-informed approach, another interviewee said that CISELSS had some particularly good ideas and suggestions for how schools can respond after a crisis. In connecting these different, yet related topics, CISELSS provides a unique focus in its approach to SEL technical assistance.

CISELSS's staff also made efforts to connect SEAs to peer agencies engaging in similar SEL and related programs, practices, and policies. One technical assistance recipient articulated the role of CISELSS as both connecting related areas of work and bridging across organizations:

I think the Center really brings in the piece around how school safety and SEL connect . . . I've appreciated that from the Center. I would also say the Center's done a great job of providing a space for us to upload resources and supports from others of those who are part of the Collaborative [Tier 2 recipients] and giving us time to share with other states, which has been really helpful.

Tier 2 recipients reported that both CISELSS and state collaborative members leveraged the state collaboratives to keep "a pulse on what's going on in the other states." This knowledge facilitated CISELSS's ability to help SEAs connect with each other to discuss similar state-level initiatives. Overall, CISELSS demonstrated its unique contribution as a bridging organization in the SEL and school safety ecosystem among agencies, topics, and practitioners. This dynamic role, however, made it necessary for CISELSS to balance its various priorities and preferences in the modes, flexibility, and topics of its support.

How Does CISELSS's Provision of Resources, Support, and Technical Assistance Balance Competing Pressures and Meet Changing Contextual Demands?

We next examine how CISELSS balances competing pressures, drawing upon insights from its staff, representatives from external partner organizations and other organizations that provide SEL and school safety technical assistance, and technical assistance recipients. To understand their general preferences, we asked feedback form respondents in 2021 to identify the extent to which certain considerations are important when they seek out providers of SEL and/or school safety technical assistance. Specifically, we asked about the providers'

- depth of expertise
- breadth of expertise
- responsiveness to current events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic)
- flexible approach to technical assistance (i.e., building support tailored to the organization)

- structured approach to technical assistance (i.e., having predeveloped programs and offerings).

First, technical assistance recipients affirmed their need for both broad and deep provider expertise. More than 90 percent of respondents ($n = 170$) rated the providers' breadth of expertise and depth of expertise as either important or very important. Second, in terms of responsiveness, flexibility, and structure in approach, respondents indicated all three considerations are important when they seek out a technical assistance provider. Ninety-three percent of feedback respondents indicated that they consider both the providers' responsiveness to current events ($n = 170$) and the providers' flexible approach to technical assistance ($n = 171$) as important or very important when seeking out a provider of SEL or school safety technical assistance. In comparison, 80 percent of feedback respondents indicated that when they seek out SEL or school safety technical assistance, the providers' structured approach to technical assistance ($n = 171$) is important or very important. These results indicate that recipients are looking for a multitude of expertise and capacities when seeking providers. Therefore, it is likely that finding balance among these aspects of technical assistance is a complex endeavor for providers charged with serving a broad audience, especially when resources are finite and not all requests for assistance can be supported. We examine how CISELSS navigated this complexity in providing technical assistance and support to SEAs. We describe the tensions, trade-offs, and CISELSS's approach.

Breadth Versus Depth

Breadth and depth of technical assistance concerns the intensity of support (i.e., Tiers 1 through 3), CISELSS's expertise, and the topics on which support focused. CISELSS operates with a fixed budget to deliver both broad and deep support, which requires CISELSS staff to strategically approach the provision of resources and support to interested recipients. CISELSS embraced a broad conceptualization of SEL and school safety, drawing upon ecological models of the conditions for learning and development. This conceptualization is in addition to its original

charge from ED to build the knowledge and capacity of SEAs and LEAs to adopt and integrate evidence-based programs and practices in SEL and school safety. A CISELSS staff member shared that they used a diagram of concentric circles to describe their work:

> We talk about that inner circle as being the individual conditions of learning and development, and that includes all of the things that are internal to individuals. We include social and emotional learning, mental health, adult self-care, collective care, or adult self-care [sic]. Those domains, because they are not siloed in our development, because they are interrelated, it doesn't make sense for our Center to say, well, we are talking about this thing called social and emotional learning as if it isn't interdependent with cognitive development, with mental health and well-being, with those other things. Then, similarly, the second circle we think of as being the conditions of the learning environment, so in that, the conditions of the learning environment for us [are] those interrelated aspects of school climate and culture, collective care for the adults, school safety, that sort of thing.

This conceptualization of SEL and school safety set the stage for support on a broader array of topics that address the five focal areas (see the box on p. 6), especially within CISELSS's Tier 1 supports. Tier 1 resources cover topics such as self-care and community care, trauma-informed distance learning strategies, connecting teacher practice with SEL, approaches to individual resilience, and an introduction to the resource compendium (see Buckley, 2020). Many of these resources were developed in response to requests for assistance or partnership. The breadth of topics covered was consistent with CISELSS's broader conceptualization of the connection between SEL, school safety, and a host of related whole person topics.

When interviewed, recipients of Tier 2 and 3 technical assistance described the need for both broad and deep expertise, and they discussed ways in which CISELSS was skilled at moving "from the big scope to a small scope." Some Tier 2 and 3 technical assistance recipients reported that they would like additional support from CISELSS around needs very specific to their particular context and situation, departing somewhat from the planned foci of

Tier 2 and 3 supports. For example, one interviewee mentioned a need for support around engaging stakeholders and other state agencies in a politically charged environment, while another interviewee expressed a need for identifying an evidence-based SEL curriculum. Other areas of need included supporting adult SEL, developing online SEL learning modules, reviewing SEL resources, and developing a comprehensive model for school safety. Some technical assistance recipients shared that they were unsure of the expertise residing at CISELSS, and one interviewee noted that they had not yet "tested the limits of [CISELSS's] expertise."

On the whole, technical assistance recipients were generally appreciative of the breadth of topics of support offered by CISELSS. Embracing a broad definition of SEL and supporting a wide array of topics, however, has the potential to generate tensions, especially because CISELSS is relatively small and has a fixed budget. Supporting a wide array of topics might make it necessary for CISELSS to draw on partnerships to supply adequate expertise to technical assistance recipients, or it could mean each topic receives more surface-level coverage rather than a deep dive. And although a variety of supports might have best served CISELSS in its early years, it might need to consider its area of deep expertise and focus for establishing its place in the ecosystem. On the whole, these tensions highlight the interrelation of breadth and depth of expertise with responsiveness and structure of support and partnership decisions.

Responsiveness and Flexibility Versus Structure

While balancing breadth and depth of intensity, expertise, and topics of support, CISELSS also sought to find balance between acting responsively to current events and flexibly to technical assistance recipients' previously unseen needs versus developing and maintaining a clear structure for how technical assistance was provided and the foci of that assistance. In CISELSS's third year, the COVID-19 pandemic and a period of historic racial reckoning increased pressure to prioritize the emergent needs of SEAs, and as interviewed CISELSS staff suggested, its newness and small size made the organization nimble and readily able to pivot

and adjust to changing conditions and needs. As discussed next, support recipients appreciated CISELSS's responsiveness and flexibility, and they also suggested some need for additional structure to be provided.

We found that some technical assistance recipient interviewees particularly appreciated CISELSS's responsiveness to changing contexts and current events. For example, CISELSS took the step of posting and promoting Tier 1 resources related to COVID-19 and resources on race and equity. This collection of resources included publications on trauma-informed practice, self-care for educators, and a list of selected resources on racial equity. CISELSS also provided webinars and other online professional learning opportunities on several of these topics, often in partnership with other organizations.[12]

CISELSS staff were responsive in providing Tier 1 resources that addressed current events, and they modified the form and content of their technical assistance for state collaborative members in response to the pandemic. The state collaboratives first convened in February 2020, shortly before the pandemic prompted widespread school closures. When we spoke to Tier 2 recipients in July 2020, in the midst of these closures, we found that they diverged in the level and frequency of their communication with CISELSS, depending on their own capacity during the unprecedented times. Some state teams continued to engage in monthly calls with CISELSS staff and stayed fairly focused on their original problem of practice. Other state teams said that they needed to shift their attention to managing school closures and subsequent reopenings and, thus,

Finding balance among aspects of technical assistance is a complex endeavor for providers charged with serving a broad audience.

obtained support or guidance on CISELSS-related issues that arose from the pandemic as needed. CISELSS adapted its support to fit the evolving needs of SEAs, even if this meant pivoting away from the original problem of practice and adapting the originally planned technical assistance.

Beyond responding to current events, CISELSS flexibly adjusted its supports to meet recipients' needs. Interviewees reported that when they had questions or requests for support or resources, CISELSS staff were accessible and accommodating. Several Tier 2 technical assistance recipients noted that CISELSS supported them not only on the planned strategic communications and alignment work of the state collaboratives, but also on any ad hoc requests. In the words of one technical assistance recipient,

> [CISELSS] has just been so flexible and willing to listen to us . . . even to the point of helping us figure out what it is that we do need help with and what they could provide; it's just an evolving process. The pandemic has been—just required this changeability, flexibility—and so, yeah, they've been working with us to keep figuring out what that is, what that support looks like.

Technical assistance recipients also highlighted that responsiveness and flexibility were useful approaches for CISELSS in working with state agencies, which operate amid myriad regulations, priorities, and programs. Some interviewees emphasized that CISELSS's willingness to adapt to states' needs is a unique and valuable aspect of CISELSS. External partners echoed this sentiment, noting CISELSS's flexible approach to working with SEAs as a strength. Altogether, these results suggest that technical assistance recipients greatly value obtaining supports and technical assistance that are aligned with their needs,

CISELSS flexibly adjusted its supports to meet recipients' needs.

whether these needs arise as the result of contextual or environmental shifts or needs that are specific to their organization type or ongoing work. Seventy percent of Tier 2 technical assistance recipients who responded to the 2021 feedback form ($n = 10$) reported that "alignment of offered support with [their] organization's needs" factored most heavily in their decision to work with CISELSS. In the words of one technical assistance recipient, "[the Center staff] are just so incredibly understanding and willing to learn alongside us about [our state context]."

Although the majority of interviewees across the technical assistance recipients noted the responsiveness and flexibility of CISELSS's support provision, interviewees across both our Year 2 and Year 3 data collection efforts also stated that additional structure could be beneficial. Tier 2 technical assistance recipients in 2020, although greatly appreciative of CISELSS's flexibility and responsiveness, expressed that they did not always understand what kinds of assistance were available to them or which activities and topics they could or should ask for guidance on because they were unsure what was within and outside CISELSS's offerings. This theme was also present throughout our interviews with Tier 2 technical assistance recipients in 2021. About one-third of these interviewees described the potential benefit of a more structured approach. One-quarter of Tier 2 technical assistance recipients interviewed in Year 3 expressed that the focus of their work together in the state collaborative had shifted slightly away from its initial conceptualization; CISELSS instead sought to understand how it could further support collaborative members moving forward, thus "being responsive to what we need, but not necessarily saying what they can offer."

These comments demonstrate that there appears to be a trade-off inherent in providing responsive and flexible support in terms of clarity of understanding about CISELSS's structure, expertise, and support. A technical assistance recipient summarized this challenge as follows:

> I guess, and I just want to be clear about this, [CISELSS's support] is helpful, but I often feel that they are looking for ways to be helpful to us, trying to make a place for themselves versus

really being clear about what they're offering us. Some of that may just be the nature of being new, being new to this space, because I do know it was recently created and launched, but it's not always clear what their goals are in helping us.

This interviewee identified a link between the highly responsive nature of CISELSS and its short lifespan so far. A few external partner organization leaders similarly noted that there was a lack of clarity about opportunities to collaborate and structures for engagement, while others in the ecosystem were, at times, unclear about CISELSS's goals or relationships with its partner organizations. One external partner who led a presentation in collaboration with CISELSS suggested that CISELSS could strengthen its structure for engaging partners by providing potential collaborators with more information about CISELSS's main activities and areas of focus and objectives when collaborating.

Technical assistance recipients largely appreciated the flexibility and responsiveness of CISELSS. However, flexibility in the absence of an established structure and organizational identity appeared to contribute to a lack of clarity for technical assistance recipients, external partner organizations, and others in the technical assistance ecosystem. As CISELSS moves from a period of development into a period of sustainability, balancing responsiveness and flexibility with structure will be especially important in establishing ongoing support and lasting partnerships.

External Partnership Versus Ownership

As a federally funded technical assistance center, CISELSS is charged with providing objective, independent support and expertise to as many interested technical assistance recipients as possible. CISELSS has leveraged direct service provision (i.e., ownership) and collaboration with external partner organizations, as expected in its original warrant, to efficiently provide more-comprehensive support. CISELSS codified this approach in a two-by-two matrix that illustrates the decisionmaking process used to select which requests for technical assistance it accepts and how those opportunities are approached (see Figure 2). Essentially, CISELSS uses two axes to inform support provision: the extent
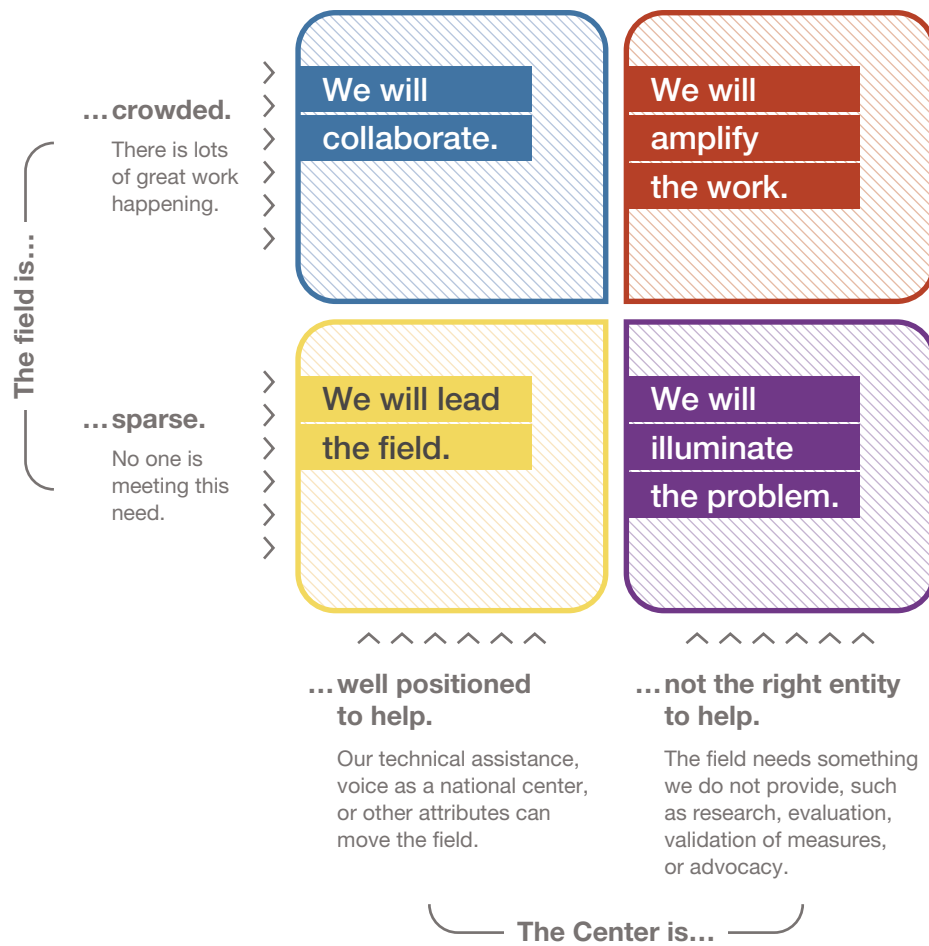
to which there are other organizations in the field already doing great work in the domain and the extent to which CISELSS is positioned in a strong role to provide the service. CISELSS

- collaborates with external partners when there is a lot of great work being done in the field and it is also well positioned to address the request
- amplifies existing work where there is lots of great work in the field and CISELSS is not well positioned to make additional contributions
- provides direct service when there is not much happening elsewhere in the field and CISELSS is well positioned to provide support
- illuminates the problem or area of need when not much is happening in the field on this issue and CISELSS is not well positioned to fulfill the need.

CISELSS uses this framework for making strategic decisions that balance the opportunity to collaborate with others in the field with direct provision of support, all while trying to maximize the reach of CISELSS's resources.

In practice, CISELSS expanded its network of partners and collaborated on technical assistance provision where possible. CISELSS made intentional efforts to engage with Regional Comprehensive Center networks, RELs, and other organizations providing support around SEL, school safety, and related topics. Partnerships were seen as beneficial to both CISELSS and its external partner organizations. In Year 2, CISELSS staff viewed partnering with other organizations as beneficial because collaborations allow CISELSS to "do more with [its] funding" and align its work with the work of other organizations such that these partnerships are "amplifying some of our priorities around alignment and coherence and integration." Additionally, CISELSS staff viewed partnerships as critical for supporting the "sustainability of [their] impact." A CISELSS staff member suggested that these partnerships provided an opportunity to learn more about what other centers or organizations are working on, where there is a potential avenue for collaboration, and where other providers believe the field is headed.

FIGURE 2

CISELSS's Decisionmaking Matrix for Responding to Requests for Support

The field is…

…crowded.
There is lots of great work happening.

> We will collaborate.

> We will amplify the work.

…sparse.
No one is meeting this need.

> We will lead the field.

> We will illuminate the problem.

…well positioned to help.
Our technical assistance, voice as a national center, or other attributes can move the field.

…not the right entity to help.
The field needs something we do not provide, such as research, evaluation, validation of measures, or advocacy.

The Center is…

SOURCE: Adapted from material provided to the authors by CISELSS.

Leaders at external partner organizations and other SEL technical assistance organizations also confirmed during interviews that CISELSS played an important role in providing additional content expertise to be used alongside support from Comprehensive Centers or RELs. Given the heightened need for SEL support during the pandemic, the ability for RELs and Comprehensive Centers to partner with CISELSS was especially valuable because CISELSS could lend its expertise around SEL-related needs.

CISELSS engaged partners in all tiers of their technical assistance. This included collaborating with other organizations in the field around authoring publications and presenting webinars under CISELSS's Tier 1 support; engaging other organiza-

tion leaders in reviewing and providing feedback on key publications and protocols used in Tier 2 support; bringing in partner organizations to present at Tier 2 professional learning opportunities; and even engaging other organizations to collaboratively support Tier 2 and Tier 3 work. CISELSS also lent its voice to the field; key staff presented professional learning, panel discussions, and keynote addresses for other organizations.

In addition to engaging external partner organizations to provide professional learning, half of the state collaborative interviewees mentioned that CISELSS staff connected them to other sources of support or brought in external experts, when appropriate. As one technical assistance recipient shared,

For example, when we were doing the SEL work, we talked a lot about how this was for students and our future goal would be to provide some supports for adults and what that would look like . . . [CISELSS staff were] able to connect me with an agency that's already started that work.

Technical assistance recipients found these additional supports helpful but were sometimes unsure of the particulars of the partnership arrangement (including the extent to which partners would remain involved as the work progressed). Although more than half of CISELSS's Tier 1 activities involved collaboration with external partners, Tier 2 and 3 supports engaged a high level of direct services from CISELSS.

CISELSS has made substantial efforts to develop partnerships and collaborations across the field. Simultaneously, CISELSS staff acknowledge that finding the right fit for partnerships can take time. Before taking on a new partnership, CISELSS staff need to ensure that the partnership is sustainable and that CISELSS is able to carve out its own space in the field without duplicating the efforts of other existing organizations. Echoing the lack of clarity among technical assistance recipients regarding CISELSS's expertise (related to its structured support offerings), other interviewees similarly shared their lack of clarity about CISELSS's role in the broader ecosystem of organizations providing technical assistance around SEL. External partners whom we interviewed endorsed CISELSS's work and shared positive experiences in working with CISELSS staff. However, a few such interviewees stated that they lacked clarity on the array of CISELSS services, funding and costs, and opportunities for ongoing partnership. Thus, CISELSS's more flexible and responsive approach to technical assistance over the past few years may make it difficult for potential collaborators to understand how a partnership with CISELSS would benefit their organization and contribute something novel to the field.

Contextual Conditions Led to Strategic Balancing of Support Type

CISELSS, since its inception, has operated within a rapidly changing educational and sociopolitical context; the COVID-19 pandemic and a period of historic racial reckoning have brought significant shifts in this context. We conceptualize these contextual factors as exerting pressure on the fulcrum on which CISELSS balances its priorities and approaches (see Figure 1). Therefore, shifts to the fulcrum often necessitate adjustments to CISELSS's balance of the technical assistance that it provides.

The COVID-19 pandemic appeared to have various influences on the work of CISELSS. Like other centers, CISELSS had to embrace virtual technical assistance and professional development offerings. In addition, CISELSS adjusted the focus of its support to assist with topics such as school reentry, trauma-informed distance learning, community care, and self-care for educators. These efforts to be responsive and flexible and to offer support on a broader array of topics in partnership with other organizations were intended to prioritize the needs of SEAs and LEAs during the pandemic.

Although a few technical assistance recipients slightly reduced their engagement with CISELSS because of the pressures of managing other education needs during the pandemic, most respondents reported that the pandemic had heightened interest in and support for SEL. In the words of one technical assistance recipient,

> Certainly, everybody's interested in how they do that [SEL] on a virtual platform, and then, how do they prioritize social emotional learning when coming back to school. So, there's been an increase in interest in social emotional learning stuff and seeing school safety as encompassing the social emotional world, as well as the mental wellness, mental health, mental illness.

Some technical assistance recipients shared that students and educators had always struggled with trauma, but the recipients had not yet had the opportunity and assistance to provide "meaningful, intentional support." The pandemic highlighted the need for SEL and related supports. Furthermore, these efforts were spurred, in part, by federal emergency funding and prioritizing of SEL as a critical need. For most state teams that we interviewed, this allowed conversations on SEL to progress, where these areas of learning had not previously been prioritized. As one technical assistance recipient stated,

The federal government came out with much of the emergency funds and identified social and emotional learning specifically as a critical need, and I think that really shifted the conversation in our state and made folks more open to the idea.

One recipient stated that "overnight" the shift toward SEL was such that those who were not already promoting this work were considered "outdated and irrelevant." Another respondent also discussed how the pandemic had "really spotlighted…inequities in education and provision of social services."

Of course, the concurrent period of historic racial reckoning brought greater attention to issues of racial injustice and inequity alongside the pandemic. Technical assistance recipients also shared their interest in a continued focus on addressing equity and racial justice in their work. When provided an open response box to identify specific topics or areas that respondents would like CISELSS to focus on in FY 2022, equity was the most common theme among individuals who provided recommendations ($n = 43$); almost 20 percent of these individuals expressed interest in topics such as antiracism, social justice, and supporting students of color, students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer, and students who are immigrants.

Technical assistance recipients, partners from external organizations, and CISELSS staff all dis-

cussed promoting equity as a strength of CISELSS. In its third year, for example, CISELSS offered technical assistance around the potential hazards of perpetuating disparities or inequities when using social, emotional, and behavioral screening tools. In the words of one CISELSS staff member,

I also think we've always prioritized equity at the organization. I think we're taking a stronger point of view on centering racial equity as part of our work and thinking about not just what does it mean to say that we are centering racial equity, but what are the skills our people need to be able to work with clients and center racial equity in our work.

Technical assistance recipients and external partners identified equity as a focus of CISELSS and praised the "commitment" and "authentic" nature of the work. As one technical assistance recipient shared, "[CISELSS has] been really helpful with helping us think through equity and SEL through that lens." CISELSS staff identified their approach to integrating equity into their work by posing questions about the equity implications of each strategic plan, toolkit, or guiding document that they produce.

Summary and Implications

Over the course of any organization's lifespan, changing contextual conditions and unexpected events are going to arise and create a need for that organization to rebalance its priorities. CISELSS provided a unique case study of a technical assistance organization operating and—to an extent—establishing its profile in the time of major contextual shifts. We used our conceptual framework to explore and describe how CISELSS balanced competing pressures to guide its provision of technical assistance. Through our analyses, we identified the following key findings:

- Technical assistance recipients combine support from several providers to meet their needs. CISELSS played an important role in coordinating with other providers in the technical assistance ecosystem to ensure that the supports received were cohesive across providers, and CISELSS filled a niche in the techni-

Changing contextual conditions and unexpected events are going to arise and create a need for organizations to rebalance their priorities.

cal assistance ecosystem by aligning SEL and school safety in its technical assistance.

- CISELSS embraced a broad conceptualization of SEL and school safety, setting the stage for the provision of support on a wide array of topics. This breadth of coverage required CISELSS to leverage expertise within and external to CISELSS and resulted in some challenges (e.g., establishing a recognized brand in the ecosystem).
- CISELSS acted responsively to current events and flexibly adjusted its technical assistance to meet recipients' needs. However, flexibility in the absence of an established structure and organizational identity appeared to contribute to a lack of clarity for support recipients and other organizations in the ecosystem.
- CISELSS leveraged collaboration with external partner organizations (i.e., partnership) and direct service provision (i.e., ownership) to efficiently provide more-comprehensive support to SEAs and LEAs.
- Contextual conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic and a period of historic racial reckoning shifted CISELSS's context and shaped the balance of the technical assistance that it provided.

We conclude with some implications that the results of this case study have for CISELSS's ongoing efforts to find balance and meet its charge as a federally funded technical assistance center.

Ensure Coherence of Support for State and Local Education Agencies

Our research showed that most technical assistance recipients engaged with more than one provider to receive SEL and school safety–related support. When CISELSS engages in the provision of support with a new SEA or LEA, spending time to understand that organization's portfolio of current technical assistance in related content areas and its culture and policy context creates an opportunity for CISELSS to increase the utility of the support that it provides. CISELSS can work with an SEA or LEA to understand the various sources of support that

they are receiving and the foci of those supports, and CISELSS should continue the practice of connecting and coordinating with those other providers. This coordination has the potential to increase the breadth or depth of support provided to a client by reducing duplication and ensuring complementary assistance across a client's support portfolio. Notably, this level of coordination and tailoring requires the recipient SEA or LEA to be transparent and up-front with new providers and in their communication with ongoing providers about all of the technical assistance that they are receiving.

Formalize Technical Assistance Offerings

The ecosystem of SEL technical assistance needs multiple providers to meet the vast and varied needs of the field. CISELSS should prioritize establishing a clear structure for and profile of available support and widely communicate that structure—even if it is one of flexibility and responsiveness—on websites and other practitioner forums where educators seek technical assistance. Potential clients benefit from clarity about what to expect from working with a provider, including goals or intended outcomes of the work and how to access needed expertise. Other providers within the ecosystem benefit from an understanding of where CISELSS complements and extends work already occurring in the field or where a partnership may expand the breadth and depth of support each organization has the capacity to provide on its own.

Engage in Regular Strategic Planning to Ensure That CISELSS's Portfolio Is Coherent and Aligned with Its Goals and Charge

In this report, we presented a descriptive snapshot of the balance of technical assistance that CISELSS provided. That is, we described its technical assistance, from its launch through the midpoint of its third year of operation, during a global pandemic and period of historic racial reckoning. These factors likely influenced the approach CISELSS took to find

balance in developing its portfolio of work. For example, creating space for flexibility and responsiveness in CISELSS's approach allowed it to weather external changes and shift its focus in ways that were appreciated by and tailored to the needs of support recipients. CISELSS, new in the technical assistance ecosystem, leaned into partnerships as ways to amplify its focal areas, learn more about what other centers or organizations were focusing on, and identify potential future collaborations. The research in this report did not, and was not intended to, evaluate the current balance of technical assistance that CISELSS provided to determine whether the approach used in the early years is the best approach to fulfilling CISELSS's goals and the charge set by ED.

CISELSS's charge is to provide technical assistance and support to SEAs and LEAs on SEL and school safety and to support the implementation of related district and school policies, programs, and practices. We know from prior research on federally funded centers that providers are often constrained by the resources that they have available for the provision of support, and this is certainly true of CISELSS (Turnbull et al., 2010). For example, with a fixed set of resources, providers must balance (1) the desire to provide support on a breadth of topics and reach a broad audience with (2) the need to provide intense support to address certain areas of need (Mitchell, Florin, and Stevenson, 2002). As CISELSS continues to navigate changes in its external context, clarifies its niche and formalizes its offerings, and moves into a more established phase of operations, it should periodically review its balance to ensure that its chosen weights on breadth versus depth, partnership versus ownership, and flexibility and responsiveness versus structure allow it to meet its charge and create the best possible outcomes for itself and its recipients of support.

APPENDIX
Data and Methods

Feedback Form Data and Analysis

Each year RAND, on behalf of CISELSS, asks individuals who have engaged with CISELSS in any capacity—Tier 1 through Tier 3—to use a web-based form to provide brief, anonymous feedback on the full scope of supports they engaged in throughout the year. We use CISELSS-collected registration, attendance, and communication lists to identify invitees. The feedback form focuses on which CISELSS supports and resources individuals engaged with and the extent to which those supports and resources have helped build local capacity to enhance SEL and school safety efforts within their organizations. In July 2020, 59 individuals out of a possible 327 provided feedback on CISELSS activities that occurred between May 2019 and April 2020.[13] In June 2021, 353 individuals out of a possible 3,506 responded to the feedback form for CISELSS activities that occurred between May 2020 and April 2021. The administration of both feedback forms occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced which individuals opted to provide voluntary feedback.

Our descriptive analyses for this report draw predominantly from responses to the 2021 (i.e., Year 3) feedback form because it included questions about the number of SEL and school safety support organizations participants work with in addition to CISELSS, how important certain considerations are when they are choosing a technical assistance provider (e.g., expertise, approach to providing support), and ongoing areas of support needed by their organization. Of note, the feedback form only asked respondents questions relevant to the ways in which they engaged with CISELSS in the past 12 months. For example, only respondents who identified as a Tier 2 (i.e., state collaborative) participant ($n = 10$) were also asked what factor weighed most heavily in their decision to work with CISELSS. Throughout this report, where we report survey data, we provide the number of individuals who responded to the particular question being presented.

In 2021, the majority of feedback respondents reported that they engaged in only Tier 1 supports (90.9 percent); individuals who reported engaging in Tier 2 (3.6 percent) and Tier 3 (5.5 percent) support made up the remaining respondents. Notably, all but 14 percent of the individuals who reported receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports also used Tier 1 supports provided by CISELSS. The respondents identified as state agency staff (28 percent), local or regional agency staff (19.3 percent), school staff (19.6 percent), or someone from an educational non-

profit, fellow technical assistance provider, research organization, or other organization (33 percent). We use the tiers of support and the agency level (i.e., SEA or LEA) of the respondent to explore descriptive trends in feedback responses.

Next we provide the full distribution of responses on two feedback form questions that are discussed in the main body of this report. First, respondents were asked when they seek SEL and/or school safety–related technical assistance and the extent to which nine considerations are important in selecting the provider with which they work. We provide the full set of responses to this question in Table A.1. Second, we asked state collaborative members (*n* = 10) which considerations factored most heavily in their decision to work with CISELSS. These results are presented in Table A.2.

Feedback Form Data Limitations

The feedback form data are not without limitations. These data are anonymous; therefore, we cannot link the provided information to specific individuals or organizations. Thus, we cannot assess change over

time within people or organizations and can only examine the broad trends using the responses available. We also do not assume that the individuals who provided feedback are representative of the full set of individuals and organizations that engaged with CISELSS for technical assistance. Given the anonymous nature of the feedback, we are unable to weight responses in ways that might better reflect the full scope of CISELSS's technical assistance recipients. Moreover, a single organization that received support might be represented in our feedback form data by multiple individual respondents, which could overemphasize the experience of a single organization's engagement with CISELSS. Given these concerns, we limit our use of these data to providing background information or contextual insights rather than to draw conclusions or make recommendations.

Interview and Document Data and Analysis

We used an embedded, illustrative case study design that draws on several levels of analysis (Yin, 2013).

TABLE A.1

The Extent to Which Respondents Identified Each Consideration Important in Selecting Which Provider to Work with When Seeking Social and Emotional Learning and/or School Safety Technical Assistance

Provider Consideration	Number of Respondents	Not at All Important (%)	Somewhat Important (%)	Important (%)	Very Important (%)
The provider's breadth of expertise	170	0	4	38	58
The provider's depth of expertise	170	0	2	26	72
The provider's responsiveness to current events (e.g., COVID-19)	170	1	6	39	54
The provider's structured approach to technical assistance (i.e., has predeveloped programs and offerings)	171	2	19	42	37
The provider's flexible approach to technical assistance (i.e., builds support tailored to the organization)	171	1	6	37	56
Receiving more thorough support at a high cost	164	20	41	30	9
Receiving less thorough support at a low cost	165	22	38	22	18
Working with a single provider to support all of my organization's needs	170	16	33	33	18
Working with a range of providers, each supporting specific needs	168	9	25	45	21

The Consideration That Factored Most Heavily in State Collaborative Teams' Decision to Work with CISELSS

Consideration	Percentage of Respondents
Depth of provider expertise	10
Breadth of provider expertise	0
Cost	10
Provider reputation	0
Alignment of offered support with your organization's needs	70
Level of offered support (e.g., frequency, intensity)	0
Other	10

NOTE: A total of ten individuals responded to this question.

Specifically, we followed the development and technical assistance activities of CISELSS over the course of its first three years. We interviewed CISELSS leadership and staff; subject-matter experts and leaders of organizations that partnered with CISELSS or that provide similar services; and recipients of Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports. Table A.3 provides the number of interviews conducted by group. The CISELSS staff whom we interviewed included key staff members who work across the various organizations that make up CISELSS and are deeply involved in providing technical assistance to CISELSS's state collaborative members, such as the CISELSS director, deputy director, and individuals from Transforming Education and CCSSO. For our interviews with technical assistance recipients, we aimed to include state collaborative members who spanned different types of technical assistance activities, such as involvement in piloting the coherence and alignment protocols for SEAs or LEAs (see Walrond, 2021; Walrond and Romer, 2021), piloting the exemplars protocol (see Caparas, 2021), or engaging in CISELSS's work around strategic communication. Additionally, in selecting technical assistance recipients to interview in Year 3, we chose technical assistance recipients that we had not interviewed before to hear new perspectives, and we also chose technical assistance recipients that we had previously interviewed in Year 2 to gain a sense of their involvement with CISELSS over time. For example, we interviewed technical assistance recipients at eight of the ten SEAs in the state collaboratives and two of the seven Tier 3 recipients. Finally, we selected a group of external partners to interview, including partner organizations that had completed the most intensive and/or prolonged work with CISELSS and other organizations commonly identified by interviewees as SEL technical assistance providers.

Over the course of the study, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews ($n = 37$) and transcribed audio recordings prior to coding and analysis. Our interview protocol asked respondents about CISELSS's mission, expertise, and technical assistance activities. To analyze our data, we began by coding interview data across different levels of abstraction, including codes that were descriptive (e.g., respondent characteristics, organizational membership), thematic (e.g., tiers of support, topics of support, perceived quality of support), and analytic (breadth, depth, responsiveness, structure), using Dedoose qualitative research software. We then completed structured case narratives (i.e., structured outlines used to aggregate coding across all respondents) to understand key themes and their prevalence across respondents and matrices to illuminate patterns across respondents (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2020; Bush-Mecenas and Marsh, 2018). To enhance the internal validity and accuracy of findings, we triangulated data across multiple sources, comparing interviews between various respondents and using document data where available to confirm key findings. In Table A.4, we provide examples of interview questions for each type of respondent.

TABLE A.3
Interview Data Collection

Interviewees	2019–2020	2020–2021	Total
CISELSS staff	4	6	10
Subject-matter experts, leaders of partner and other organizations, advisory board members	7	5	12
Tiers 2 and 3 technical assistance recipients	5	10	15

TABLE A.4
Sample Interview Questions

Respondent	Sample Interview Questions
Center staff	• Please describe the model for providing technical assistance. • Who qualifies for Tiers 1, 2, and 3 support? • What factors into the decision about whether to provide general, targeted, or intensive technical assistance? • How are decisions made regarding the provision of services (e.g., the nature and duration of services)?
External partner	• What are key strategies and activities—including training events, products, meetings—that are a part of your collaboration with the SEL Center? What are your anticipated outcomes from this collaboration? • We are curious about the existing ecosystem of SEL support for state and local educational agencies. Who are the key players/organizations in this ecosystem? How does the expertise and/or technical assistance provided vary among these players? • How does your organization interact and/or collaborate with others in this space? How do you work together with other organizations or partners to define roles and responsibilities when there is overlap in your areas of expertise or organizational capabilities?

Technical assistance recipient	• I would like to understand how you generally access technical assistance around SEL and school safety issues. Where do you typically go for assistance in these areas?
	• How do you manage several sources of support and partnerships around SEL?
	• [Collaborative members] Please consider the collaboratives facilitated by the SEL Center. How has participation in these networks of practice supported your work with respect to SEL?
	  – What elements of the state collaborative support were most helpful?
	  – How could the state collaboratives be improved?

Notes

1 CISELSS is funded via ED's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools.

2 An external partner organization is any organization that is not one of CISELSS's operating partners (i.e., WestEd, Transforming Education, the Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], or RAND) with which CISELSS collaborates for the provision of technical assistance. External partners include RELs, Regional Comprehensive Centers, and nonprofit technical assistance organizations.

3 We use the term ownership in this model to reflect CISELSS's sole responsibility in providing direct supports or resources to recipients of technical assistance.

4 RAND serves as the independent evaluator of CISELSS. RAND does not provide technical assistance under CISELSS and so does not have a conflict of interest in conducting the evaluation.

5 Title IV Part A–funded centers refers to those technical assistance centers funded by ED through the Every Student Succeeds Act, Title IV Part A funding stream.

6 CISELSS has adopted a broad definition of school safety, which includes psychological and emotional safety and the many approaches practitioners leverage to improve classroom and school climate (CISELSS, 2019).

7 In-person gatherings happened prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, all state collaborative gatherings have been virtual and will be virtual through the culmination of these collaboratives in September 2021.

8 The exemplars guide offers SEAs a mixed-methods approach to (1) identify schools or districts that have notably positive outcomes in SEL, school climate, and related whole-person initiatives and (2) disseminate their effective practices more broadly.

9 The SEA alignment and coherence protocol is designed to review and support the alignment and coherence of the many SEL-related programs, practices, and policies that might be operating within a state. The LEA version of the protocol focuses on this alignment and coherence within a district context.

10 ED has built opportunities for national centers to collaborate with and learn from others. For example, ED launched the Title IV Part A Technical Assistance Center that is tasked with coordinating across all federally funded centers focused on student well-being, SEL, and safety, including CISELSS.

11 For feedback form respondents, Tier 2 recipients were only individuals who reported participating in CISELSS's state collaboratives. Tier 3 recipients were individuals who received Tier 3 supports and were not participants in the state collaboratives. Tier 1 recipients were all other respondents who engaged in general support from CISELSS.

12 Three COVID-19 resources, relating to strategies for educator self-care (Pate, 2020a), strategies for community care (Betz, 2020), and strategies for trauma-informed distance learning (Pate, 2020b) were the most frequently downloaded. Each of these resources was downloaded over 2,000 times between May 2020 and April 2021. Webinar registration lists also suggest that Tier 1 resources are reaching large audiences. For example, nearly 1,000 individuals registered for CISELSS's "Evidence-Based Practices for Equity in Social and Emotional Learning" webinar in April 2021.

13 The count of invitees, or the denominator for our response rate, accounts for duplicate email addresses (i.e., an individual who engaged in more than one CISELSS-provided support) but was not monitored for other email discrepancies (e.g., an individual who used more than one email account to register for a CISELSS engagement). Thus, we received feedback from at least 18 percent of individuals who engaged with CISELSS between May 2019 and April 2020, although the true response rate might have been slightly higher.

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About This Report

This report examines the first three years of operation for the Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety (CISELSS). We explore how CISELSS balanced competing pressures and the influence of shifting contextual conditions in the provision of technical assistance to state and local education agencies. This report provides insights about CISELSS's early implementation that might help guide efforts to continuously improve its provision of support.

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