



LESSONS FROM THE PARTNERSHIPS FOR  
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INITIATIVE

VOLUME 2, PART 6

# Prioritizing Racial Equity Within Social and Emotional Learning in Tacoma

One of Six Case Studies of Schools and  
Out-of-School-Time Program Partners

SUSANNAH FAXON-MILLS, HEATHER L. SCHWARTZ,  
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Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this publication.

ISBN: 978-1-9774-0997-3

*Cover and interior: Photos and images provided by Lister Elementary School*

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# HOW A TACOMA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ESTABLISHED SEL AND EQUITY AS A NONNEGOTIABLE FOUNDATION FOR ITS WORK WITH STUDENTS, STAFF, AND FAMILIES

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## **About the SEL Case Studies**

The SEL case studies feature partnerships between elementary schools and out-of-school-time (OST) programs in six communities. Each case study spotlights a specific approach to implementing social and emotional learning (SEL). A cross-cutting report briefly summarizes each case and highlights shared themes among them. That report can be found at [www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4).

While there is no consensus definition of SEL, most of the school and OST programs relied on the following widely used definition at the time: SEL is “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”<sup>1</sup>

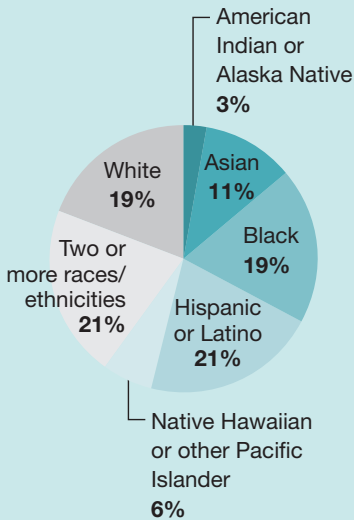
The six school–OST program partnerships that we feature belong to 76 total school–OST program partnerships involved in the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI). Half of the 76 partnerships started their SEL work in 2017–2018, and the other half could choose to start their work in 2019–2020. PSELI is a six-year initiative that The Wallace Foundation launched in 2017 to explore whether and how children benefit when schools and their OST programs partner to improve social and emotional learning, as well as what it takes to do this work. The six communities that participate in PSELI are Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The RAND Corporation serves as the research partner on PSELI and is responsible for gathering implementation and outcome data from PSELI participants in each of the six communities and producing a series of reports that share useful lessons with the broader field.

# SETTING THE CONTEXT

## Lister Demographics as of 2017–2018

Percentage of students by  
race/ethnicity



**82%**

Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch



**34%**

Percentage of English language learners



**10 years**

Median years of experience (teachers)

This case study highlights the social and emotional learning (SEL) work of Lister Elementary School in Tacoma, Washington, during the four-school-year period of 2017–2018 to 2020–2021.

Lister Elementary serves approximately 425 students from preschool through fifth grade. It has a diverse student body: As of 2017, Black students, Hispanic or Latino students, White students, and students of two or more races each were approximately one-fifth of the student population. Most students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

As noted in “About the SEL Case Studies” above, Lister is one of six elementary school and out-of-school-time (OST) partnerships in Tacoma that participated in the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI) to integrate SEL throughout its school and afterschool day. Tacoma Public Schools (TPS) had a preexisting districtwide commitment (referred to as “Whole Child”) to supporting students’ social and emotional well-being. PSELI was intended to build on the district’s existing Whole Child work, in part through school-OST coordination. The “About the SEL Case Studies” section on the first page and the appendix provide additional information about PSELI.

Among the six PSELI communities, Tacoma was unique in that most of its participating schools did not have preexisting afterschool programs on site at the outset of PSELI. PSELI-related OST programming did not begin in earnest until the second year of the four-year initiative, was interrupted by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in year three, and shifted to a virtual model that combined students from multiple schools in year four. Therefore, Lister’s partnership with its OST programs was at an early or else interrupted stage of development during most of the four-year period we examined, and their

coordination of school-OST SEL efforts was nascent. Because of this, we focus this particular case study on SEL during just the school day at Lister. We will analyze the Tacoma school-OST program partnerships, as well as SEL implementation in Tacoma OSTs, in future study reports.

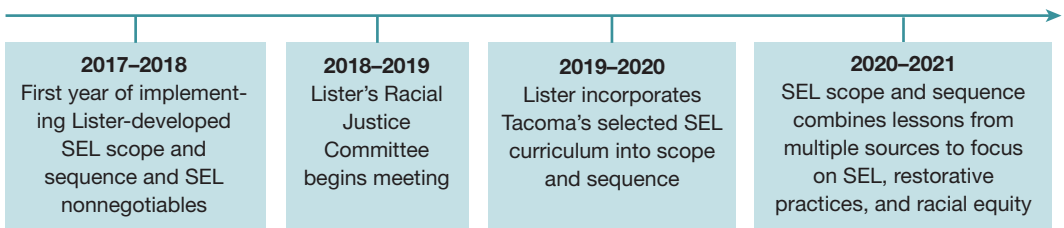
The focus of this case study is Lister Elementary’s schoolwide commitment to SEL and how, over time, Lister school leaders and staff integrated a focus on racial equity and restorative practices<sup>2</sup> into its SEL approach. Lister’s multiyear SEL and equity trajectory predates its involvement in PSELI and, as shown in Figure 1, evolved over the course of several years.

In the sections that follow, we describe four key strategies that supported Lister’s evolving SEL and equity work: gaining and maintaining staff buy-in, building racial equity and restorative practices into Lister’s SEL resources, designing and delivering a range of professional supports to help build staff SEL and equity capacity, and reframing SEL and equity work as complementary to (rather than competing with) academic priorities. This case study also discusses how Lister staff adapted their SEL work during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the appendix, we summarize the data we collected and how we analyzed them for this report.

### The key individuals who led the SEL and equity work at Lister Elementary:

- the school principal, who began her role at Lister in 2016–2017
- the assistant principal, who began her role at Lister in 2017–2018
- the Tacoma Whole Child (TWC) facilitator, a teacher at Lister who also helps facilitate the district’s Whole Child work at Lister. This includes co-leading (with the principal and assistant principal) a monthly Whole Child team meeting to discuss SEL
- the school counselor, who also co-led (with the assistant principal) Lister’s Racial Justice Committee, which was initiated in 2018–2019 and met monthly to discuss topics related to racial equity at Lister.

FIGURE 1  
Timeline of Lister’s SEL and Equity Evolution



# GAINING STAFF BUY-IN FOR SEL REQUIRED CONCERTED EFFORT

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*“I think it was powerful for buy-in [to have] teachers lead the [SEL] work. . . . This isn’t [just] an admin thing; this is what’s best for kids, and teachers believe in it.”*

**Katrina Tuggle,**  
assistant principal, Lister  
Elementary

When the principal started as a first-year principal at Lister Elementary in 2016, she knew that something had to change. She described walking into the school on her first day feeling “terrified” of the task ahead of her. Lister was struggling academically, suspension and missed instruction rates were high (particularly among Black and multiracial boys), and there was a perceived pattern of taking reactive rather than proactive steps toward school improvement. She felt that it was time to take a step back and develop “a systematic approach to addressing the whole child.”

The following year, she brought on an assistant principal with a deep commitment to SEL and racial equity. This was also the year that PSELI began. With a shared understanding that prioritizing SEL and equity was what was best for children, Lister’s school leaders were the initial driving force behind a schoolwide focus on SEL, and they invested in getting teachers and other school staff committed as well. Gaining and maintaining staff buy-in was an ongoing process, and not always a smooth one. The principal explained that there was an exodus of about 13 staff members after her first year at Lister; she felt that several of these departures were of staff members who probably were not the right fit for her vision for Lister or for the school’s context. For example, based on data from a district survey of school staff, the principal was concerned that some staff did not believe in educators’ ability to positively impact students who came from disadvantaged home environments (e.g., single-parent homes, foster care).

While buy-in for SEL among the remaining and new staff members was generally high, some school staff members whom we interviewed in spring 2018 and spring 2019 reported that some teachers’ commitments to SEL were superficial or based on compliance, while



A flyer with words of encouragement for Lister students and staff (the Lister Lions)

other teachers were committed in theory but were concerned about the time that SEL required or anxious about taking on something new or outside their comfort zone.

To strengthen buy-in schoolwide, the principal and assistant principal used Lister's existing Whole Child team<sup>3</sup> to cultivate teacher leaders who would champion SEL among their peers. Lister's Whole Child team met monthly and was facilitated by the Whole Child facilitator, the principal, and the assistant principal. These meetings also included the school counselor, student services representatives (e.g., academic support staff or Title I teachers), and teachers representing each grade level. At Lister, the Whole Child team played a substantive role in selecting and developing the school's SEL resources, training their peers and colleagues in the use of those resources, and providing ongoing feedback about necessary adjustments or refinements to Lister's SEL work. Specifically, the Whole Child team, along with the two school leaders, developed and improved a set of SEL expectations and instructional resources for school staff (described further in the next section).

School leaders also asked for input from those not on the Whole Child team via standing meetings, small-group feedback sessions, and surveys. They

### **Lesson Learned**

Buy-in for SEL came from identifying teacher champions and putting them in leadership positions, soliciting teacher feedback and acting on it, and highlighting short-term SEL wins.





Visuals with SEL guidance for students

solicited staff opinions on a range of topics, including the amount of time spent on SEL instruction, the perceived quality and content of professional development (PD), and potential improvements to the SEL scope and sequence. Crucially, the principal and assistant principal then used the feedback to adjust their approach. For example, in response to teacher feedback, they added an introduction at the start of PD sessions defining the vocabulary that they would be using during the training.

From the early days, Lister leaders communicated to staff the positive impact of their SEL work, and this further helped teachers buy into the value of SEL. For example, although SEL encompassed more than behavior management, they viewed fewer disciplinary issues as one positive outcome of SEL efforts. As a school leader noted in spring 2019, “People are seeing that students are able to identify their emotions so much better. . . . You can actually have a conversation about feelings and strategies

used and how we're going to calm down. . . . Last year at this time, we were over a hundred suspensions . . . and we have I think ten this year right now." This stated decrease in suspensions comports with analyses of school discipline data, which show a sizable drop in the percentage of students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions (though not as large as the interviewee indicated): from 10.0 percent in the 2016–2017 school year to 4.4 percent in the 2018–2019 school year. And on our survey of school staff, the rate of staff agreement about the proportion of students with key SEL skills increased moderately from fall 2017 to spring 2020. One staff member described how she had seen the impact of SEL increase over time: "Our kids, they can express themselves, they advocate for themselves without fear. You can see a student who has come to the school recently versus a student who has been here for years. . . . The way they [students] communicate with each other is probably the coolest thing I've ever seen." According to school leaders, experiencing firsthand these changes in student behavior and skills helped teachers buy in to the value of SEL at Lister.

Together, with a shared sense of buy-in to the idea that focusing on SEL was making a difference for their students, Lister school leaders and staff continued to build a school climate<sup>4</sup> that reflects what one staff member described in a spring 2021 interview: "Everything we do [concerning SEL] is really a nonnegotiable, and it's just ingrained in what we do at Lister. It is Lister; it's who we are."

## EFFORTS TO BUILD EQUITY INTO SEL DEVELOPED OVER TIME

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Defining the scope of SEL at Lister was described by one school leader as "always an evolution." This was evident as Lister's suite of SEL resources underwent the annual refinements, growing by 2020–2021 to include

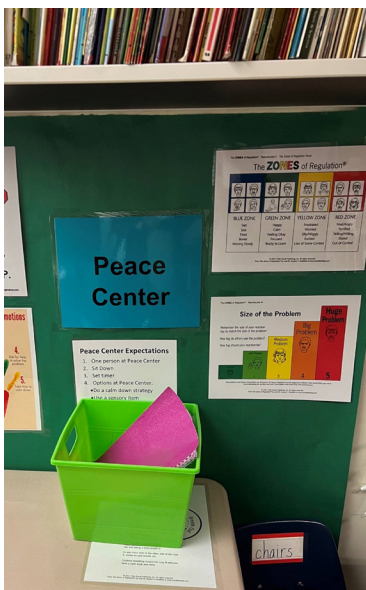
*“We implemented SEL one step at a time . . . those baby steps, taking on one thing, doing it well, making it nonnegotiable, making sure everybody is in, willing, and ready as educators as well as school staff to implement it with fidelity. And then as soon as we get good at that, adding one more thing.”*

**Michelle Hahn,**  
Tacoma Whole Child  
facilitator, Lister Elementary

racial justice and restorative practice lessons. The Whole Child team and two school leaders started their work in 2017–2018 by developing an SEL scope and sequence that pulled together lessons from multiple SEL sources. That year, the scope and sequence focused primarily on Zones of Regulation (Zones), an SEL resource that helps students identify and communicate what emotional “zone” they are in during the first half of the year, and then later that year turned to a series of lessons that the assistant principal developed based on CASEL’s SEL competencies.<sup>5</sup>

Also in 2017–2018, school leaders developed, in collaboration with staff, a list of SEL nonnegotiables that were to be embedded schoolwide. The SEL nonnegotiables were expectations such as common SEL materials for each classroom, the use of calming strategies (e.g., breathing exercises) and warm greetings (e.g., looking every student in the eye and greeting them before they enter the classroom), and a designated location in each classroom for a Peace Center (i.e., an area of the classroom with different visual and tactile resources, such as stress balls, where students could go when they want to regroup or calm themselves). This list of expectations was a living document that the Whole Child staff team voted on each year and then consistently revisited throughout the year to ensure shared agreement.

These nonnegotiables might have contributed to what was a consistent strength at Lister. According to staff surveys, from 2019 to 2021, almost all (97 percent or more) of Lister staff agreed that their school had developed a clear vision for SEL, as well as a clear road map for getting to specific student SEL outcomes. The SEL nonnegotiables also articulated what interviewees often described as one of the most powerful components of their SEL work: a common language shared by students and staff. The four color-coded Zones of Regulation (blue, green, yellow, and red) served as a starting point in staff and students’ communication with each other.<sup>6</sup> As one staff member explained, “[H]aving the same language is so helpful for our kids. I can [also] use it as



Peace Centers like this are available to students in every classroom.

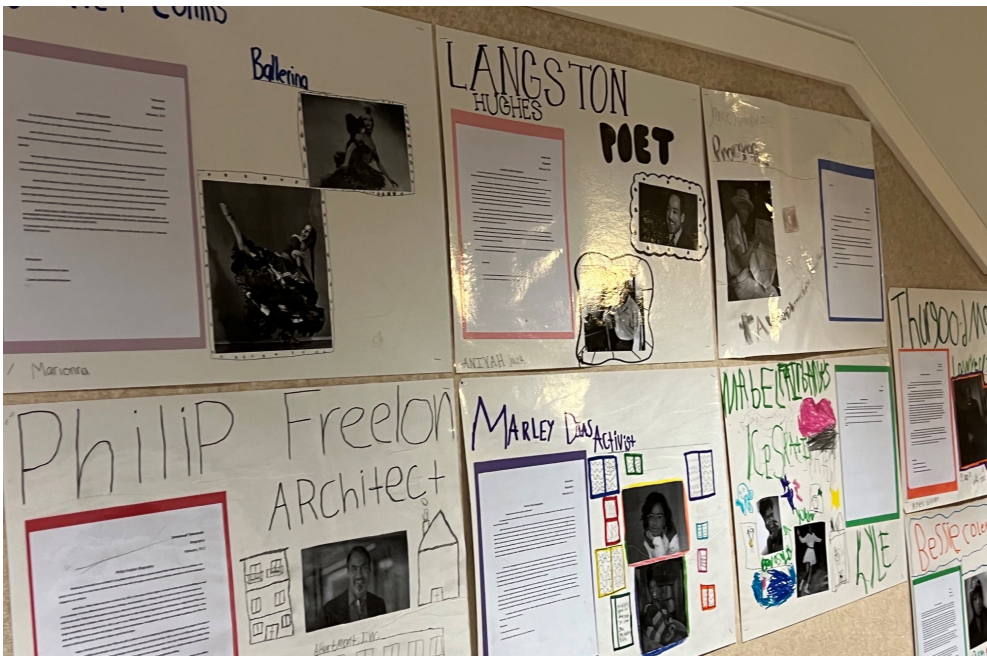
an adult. ‘Your behavior’s put me in the red zone right now.’ ‘Oh!’”

Lister continued to use Zones and CASEL competencies as the foundation of its SEL scope and sequence in 2018–2019 but also incorporated a weekly lesson from one of three SEL curricula that schools were piloting as part of Tacoma’s efforts to select its official PSELI curriculum. Then, in 2019–2020, TPS selected Success for All’s Getting Along Together (GAT) resource as its PSELI curriculum, and Lister incorporated GAT lessons into its weekly scope and sequence in addition to Zones. Although Lister school staff stressed that the GAT curriculum was one of the best SEL resources available, they deemed it insufficiently reflective of the diversity of their student body and explained that they had to supplement it to make it more culturally responsive for their students.

In addition to wanting the curriculum to be more culturally responsive, Lister leaders were also realizing that they wanted a tighter link between their SEL work and an increasing focus at their school on racial equity. This reflected one of the most significant developments

## Lesson Learned

SEL and equity efforts are mutually reinforcing.



Student work posted on school bulletin boards

within Lister’s SEL evolution: making explicit what they perceived to be an inextricable connection between SEL and equity. As one school leader put it, “[Y]ou can’t do any of this work around SEL if you don’t address and lead the work around racial justice and equity.” One interviewee described an early conversation between school leaders at Lister, in which they arrived at the mutual understanding that racial justice had to be a fundamental element of their work with staff and students. Otherwise, if teachers were operating from a place of racial bias, it would undermine the school’s efforts around SEL. In other words, without active reflection by staff on their own attitudes and beliefs about race, they would risk developing SEL practices or systems that are infused with, or perpetuate, racial biases or assumptions.

Just as school leaders viewed Lister’s racial justice work as fundamental to its SEL efforts, interviewees expressed that the reverse was also true: They perceived the school’s work on SEL as playing a crucial role in supporting its vision for racial justice. Starting in 2019, the school had embedded racial justice into their school’s common agreements, mission, and vision. As of fall 2021, the school included the following racial justice mission statement on its website: “To support parents, staff, and school-based and educational system leaders in partnering to co-design equitable, anti-racist schools that advance collective well-being.” One staff person explained that Lister’s SEL work was the “platform” from which this work toward racial justice could flourish. For example, this person described how the focus on developing students’ emotional awareness and relationship skills laid the groundwork for students to take the emotional risks necessary for having challenging conversations about race and equity with one another. And a school leader credited Zones with being a particularly valuable tool in Lister’s evolving racial justice work: “Zones is very freeing because a lot of times students of color, specifically Black boys or Brown boys, emotions are a cause for discipline. And what Zones did was it created this opportunity that every emotion is okay. It’s just what we do about it.” This school leader explained that staff acknowledgment of all emotions as valid and accepted, paired with restorative practices, was part of Lister’s efforts to address racism in discipline.

To reflect these connections between SEL and equity, Lister school leaders progressively adjusted their SEL scope and sequence to focus on restorative practices and racial justice. By 2020–2021,

school leaders (with input from the Whole Child team) had ultimately developed a scope and sequence that included weekly sets of four lessons, with one lesson each from Zones and GAT, one lesson that focused on restorative practices, and one that addressed racial justice. School leaders adapted the racial justice lessons in large part from the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance) instructional materials. These lessons covered topics such as immigration, recognizing bias in advertising and literature, and what it means to be an ally. The restorative practice lessons were developed by Lister leaders and were based on a combination of the assistant principal’s prior teaching experiences, online research, and trainings that select Lister staff received from the National Center of Restorative Justice over several years. Pulling together instructional resources in this way from multiple sources such as Zones, GAT, and Learning for Justice was important, one school leader told us, because “[I]n isolation, none of them would work as well. They all go together.”

Staff survey data suggested that teachers were putting Lister’s SEL resources into practice: More than 90 percent of Lister teachers reported frequent use of written SEL plans in spring 2020 and spring 2021. In a group interview in 2021, Lister teachers expressed that the explicit SEL instruction at Lister had been the most effective strategy for improving SEL at their school.

Our surveys also demonstrated that teachers were following the school’s adjustments to the curricular content. In spring 2020 and spring 2021, 95 to 97 percent of Lister staff reported that their school used restorative practices to a moderate or great extent. Also, 62 percent of Lister staff respondents *strongly* agreed in spring 2021 (the year in which they had incorporated racial justice topics into their SEL scope and sequence) that Lister’s SEL curriculum was appropriate for students from different cultural backgrounds, up from 35 percent with strong agreement in spring 2020.

Lister staff acknowledged that there was more work to be done at the time of our final round of data collection

### **Lesson Learned**

Instructional resources for SEL and equity can and should be refined over time to reflect evolving school priorities.

in spring 2021. Along with building equity into SEL instruction, Lister leaders had also increasingly prioritized linking SEL instruction across grade levels. They wanted the SEL curriculum to build from one grade level to the next, rather than repeat itself with the same lesson plans for multiple grade levels. Although this kind of grade-level alignment had been put in place for the Zones and GAT lesson plans, the Whole Child team discussed the need to further differentiate by grade level the restorative practice and racial justice lesson plans.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BUOYED SEL AND EQUITY INSTRUCTION

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Of course, providing SEL instructional content and expectations for its use only goes so far; teachers need to feel comfortable and equipped to implement it. To this end, by the 2020–2021 school year, Lister leaders were providing staff with a range of professional supports throughout the year that developed staff skills in and knowledge of SEL, restorative practices, and racial equity.

Lister’s professional support for SEL and equity generally took four forms:

1. schoolwide trainings for all Lister educators
2. train-the-trainer PD for key staff members
3. SEL skill practice and equity knowledge development during staff meetings
4. use of monitoring and evaluation tools to provide individual feedback.

Rather than joining the PSELI-wide trainings provided by the district, Lister leaders preferred to implement their own PD on SEL, restorative practices, and racial justice for staff: “We like to do [PD] in house. I think that that makes a difference for the buy-in as well as the accountability because the people who are leading the building are also leading the work.”

Like the SEL lessons, the slate of trainings the school leaders provided to Lister staff regarding SEL lesson plans evolved each

year. In 2019–2020, for example, after GAT was selected as the SEL curriculum for Tacoma’s six-school cohort participating in PSELI, Lister school leaders spent several days throughout the school year getting teachers familiar with the progression of SEL lessons and leading them through example lessons. Then, in 2020–2021, Lister leaders facilitated one training prior to the start of the school year that introduced staff to that year’s SEL scope and sequence, and then Whole Child teacher leaders provided their grade-level colleagues with additional SEL PD (including GAT refresher trainings) throughout the year.

In addition to the PD related to the SEL curriculum, Lister leaders also led several trainings throughout the school year dedicated specifically to racial justice and restorative practices. The principal and assistant principal developed these trainings with the support of an organizational coaching consulting firm and in collaboration with Lister’s Racial Justice Committee. This committee met monthly and was led by the school counselor and assistant principal. Committee members included a variety of teachers, an instructional coach, a community liaison, Head Start and pre-K representatives, and a paraprofessional. Racial justice trainings at Lister focused on the history of racism in America and K–12 education, white privilege, and, according to one school leader, “developing a common language around racism and systems that perpetuate racism and how that impacts education and impacts our practice.” A school leader in spring 2020 emphasized that staff were paid to attend these racial justice trainings and that they were also paid for their time to read books related to racial equity, such as *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Though Lister staff were compensated for any trainings that occurred outside of required contract times, this person noted the importance of compensation for racial justice work in particular because “equity work often goes unpaid.”

In addition to schoolwide and train-the-trainer trainings, Lister leaders also modeled SEL practices in their standing staff meetings. For example, monthly Whole

## Lesson Learned

In-house PD can be particularly effective when a school or OST program has customized its SEL practices or supports.



Signs with discussion prompts display pictures of Lister students.



Child and Racial Justice Committee meetings began with warm welcomes and community circle practices in which staff members each shared their response to a specific prompt (e.g., if you had a personal slogan, what would it be?). In spring 2021, a staff member told us that the emphasis on modeling SEL practices in this way was a strength of Lister’s professional development.

Finally, school leaders used their monitoring and evaluation processes as a mechanism for SEL professional development. This, too, evolved over time. In 2018, a school leader explained that monitoring SEL implementation meant dropping in to watch when teachers said they would be teaching SEL. In 2020–2021, Lister used the district’s standard teacher evaluation tool, which had the advantage of being familiar to teachers and included SEL as a content area. The school leaders at Lister used the scores on this rubric and their accompanying evidence, along with a simple Lister-developed walkthrough tool, to initiate conversations with teachers about SEL in their classrooms.

## SEL AND EQUITY ULTIMATELY PROMOTED, RATHER THAN DETRACTED FROM, ACADEMICS

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Lister’s expectations and resources for SEL and equity supported notably high levels of SEL implementation at Lister: By 2019–2020, observers in daylong observations noted explicit SEL instruction in a majority (60 percent) of observed classes. In 2020–2021, the school’s master schedule required 30 minutes of explicit instruction on SEL, racial equity, and/or restorative practices all five days of the school week. This was much more than the school district’s expectation, which was to provide 30 minutes of explicit SEL instruction each week. In addition to those daily 30 minutes, Lister also expected teachers to hold both a 15-minute morning circle and a 15-minute closing circle with their students each day. (Morning and closing circles are opportunities for students to check in with their emotions and share their reflections on a specific question or prompt.)

However, even when school leaders and staff are committed to—and supported in—their SEL and equity work, it can be



A group of students gathers for community circle time.

difficult to balance those priorities with academic demands. Our interviews at Lister reflected this ongoing challenge. For example, in fall 2019, a school leader at Lister spoke about trying to find the “sweet spot” of the right amount of SEL instruction. This person was concerned that SEL expectations might require too much time of teachers given the high academic demands on the school, which was, at the time, in the bottom 5 percent of schools throughout the state: “[T] here’s so much to teach and there’s so much to hit, and I know giving up 30 minutes a day for something that’s not mandated by the district was hard.” School staff also shared that it could be hard to find the time for SEL or to keep up with the SEL scope and sequence; in spring 2020, when asked what they wished they had to better implement their SEL work at Lister, one teacher said, simply, “more hours in the day.”

Lister leaders addressed the tension between time spent on academics and time dedicated to SEL and equity in three ways:

1. First, school leaders emphasized that SEL and equity in the classroom had the power to

*“As teachers we talk a lot about ‘we don’t have time, we don’t have time.’ But in my perspective, I have a lot of academic time, because I’m [no longer] helping kiddos problem-solve, because we’ve [already] taught them how to do that and we’re continually reinforcing. So my time as an educator is almost used a little more wisely.”*

**Michelle Hahn,**  
Tacoma Whole Child  
facilitator, Lister Elementary

## Lesson Learned

Explaining how SEL can enhance academic performance and providing scheduling flexibility with protected time for SEL can alleviate pressure on teachers and teacher leaders.

positively influence students' academic outcomes and that focusing on SEL and equity was a strategy for ultimately maximizing the time teachers spent on academics. As a school leader explained, "The fear at the onset of this was 'I'm going to lose instruction.' But what [teachers have] gained is that learning is centered around relationships, and when I have relationships with my students and we take care of the human element, we can achieve much more."

2. Lister leaders also took practical steps toward ensuring SEL's place amongst the school's academic priorities. Interviewees emphasized the importance of designating specific time periods for focusing on SEL during the day. That way, the onus was not on the teachers to find time in their already packed agenda to address SEL with their students. Without this designated time, it would have been easy for teachers to push SEL by the wayside in order to meet the urgency of academic demands.
3. Also important was building flexibility into that SEL schedule so that teachers could still be responsive to the demands and flow of their academic day. For example, although the time for SEL was required, teachers had autonomy in deciding which of the lessons from a given week's scope and sequence happened on which day during the 2020–2021 school year. There was also a flex day built into the weekly schedule, meaning that there were four lessons each week but five days in which to complete them so that if a conversation with students was cut short on Wednesday, it could be continued on Thursday without feeling rushed to complete the next SEL lesson. Furthermore, if teachers experienced a barrier to teaching SEL during the scheduled time, they could speak with school leaders to come up with an alternative schedule on a case-by-case basis.

These strategies appear to have been successful. On the staff survey, Lister consistently had the lowest rate of teachers among the six Tacoma schools who agreed or strongly agreed that pressure to improve student academic achievement made it hard to focus on SEL, even though Lister expected more SEL instruction than any of the other schools. There was also a notable decrease in Lister teachers reporting that sort of pressure over the course of four years: While about half of staff agreed that academic pressure made it hard to focus on SEL in the 2018 and 2019 surveys, that dropped to about one-third of teachers in the 2020 and 2021 surveys.

## ADAPTING TO COVID-19

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In spring 2020, one of our interviews with the principal and assistant principal was cut short: They had just received notice that TPS, along with all districts in Washington State, was shutting down in-person instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. TPS initiated online distance learning shortly thereafter, and school buildings stayed closed for the rest of the school year. TPS began the following fall with all-remote instruction and then slowly transitioned to in-person instruction over the course of the school year. Overall, SEL expectations at Lister remained consistent regardless of whether instruction was in-person or remote. As one staff person explained, “I don’t think [our SEL practices] changed; I do think [they] shifted a bit to adapt to the virtual world.”

School leaders and the Whole Child team dedicated time early in the school year to expanding the SEL nonnegotiables document to include adaptations for implementing SEL in the virtual space (see Figure 2 for an example). The Whole Child team dedicated many of their team meetings to problem-solving how to adapt the SEL scope and sequence for the realities of online learning.

In some ways, the pandemic and virtual learning deepened or reinforced existing SEL practices. One staff person noted that circle discussions with students were paramount to connecting effectively with students in the virtual space.

Virtual learning also opened a unique opportunity for family engagement even if it did not take the form that school leaders had planned. School leaders sent resources to students’ families so that nonnegotiables could be continued at home. For example, each

FIGURE 2  
**Sample from Nonnegotiable Document**

| <b>Lister SEL Non-Negotiables</b>   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>In Person Learning</b>   | <b>Changes for Virtual Learning</b>   |
| <p><b>Warm Greeting</b><br/>                     Every morning staff will be present outside their door when the bell rings to greet students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look student in eye</li> <li>• Greet student by name</li> <li>• EX: Handshake, fist pound, high five, nod</li> </ul> | <p><b>Virtual Warm Greeting</b><br/>                     As students enter the virtual platform have your camera on to greet students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nonverbal such as hand movements</li> <li>• Post in chat</li> <li>• Post an appropriate GIF</li> <li>• Verbally</li> </ul> |

Lister’s SEL nonnegotiables document included virtual learning adaptations for each of its SEL nonnegotiables, including warm greetings (pictured here), calming strategies, and reinforcement of schoolwide Zones language.

**Lesson Learned**

Previously created SEL resources and professional development supports helped school staff adapt SEL practices to meet unexpected challenges; this included distributing SEL materials so that they could be accessible to students and families at home.

student received a kit that included all the materials necessary to create a Peace Center in their own home (e.g., molding clay, journal, stress ball). And the nature of online learning meant that families were regularly exposed to SEL content because it was happening in their own homes: They heard the Zones of Regulation check-ins, and they received the posters and Peace Center materials that would have otherwise only stayed in the school building. Teachers also intentionally adapted some SEL lessons so that students could engage their families. For example, teachers adapted a lesson to ask students to have their different family members participate and record themselves making “I feel . . .” statements with each other.

The pandemic also stalled some of Lister’s work on SEL and equity. For example, Lister had planned on setting requirements for integrating SEL into core content throughout the school day in 2020–2021 and had been working on instructional resources to help teachers meet those expectations. But, as one school leader explained, “We had these beautiful unit plans ready to rock and roll . . . but because COVID happened, everything kind of changed.” At the time of our spring 2021 interviews, school leaders told us that teachers would be required to implement the integrated unit plans in the following school year.

Those we interviewed viewed the challenges they faced during the pandemic as temporary setbacks. Lister looked forward to hitting the ground running with in-person family engagement, full SEL integration, continued focus on racial equity (including efforts to ensure that students feel represented in the images they see around school and in their books), and continued refinement of the SEL scope and sequence when the pandemic eased.

## CONCLUSION

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This case is an example of ensuring that educators have the instructional resources and professional support to embed SEL and equity into their work with each other, students, and families. It is one of several systematic approaches to enacting SEL for elementary-age students. To see other strategies, view the case studies summary report, *Strengthening Students' Social and Emotional Skills: Lessons from Six Case Studies of Schools and Out-of-School-Time Program Partners* (available at [www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4)), in which we describe approaches such as developing an effective SEL committee that includes a school and OST partner, finding and protecting time for SEL in the school and afterschool schedules, and focusing on adult SEL first, among others.

There are notable **successes** in this case study:

- School leaders established SEL and equity as clear and complementary priorities at Lister, and staff increasingly bought into the value of SEL and equity in their own right and as platforms for improving academic outcomes.
- Lister was a consistent exemplar when it came to implementation of SEL instruction. Our study found more SEL instruction at Lister during observed sessions, and more teachers reported using written SEL lesson plans, than at any of the other five PSELI schools in Tacoma.
- Lister staff received comprehensive support in their SEL and equity work. This included written SEL lessons that incorporated racial equity, a range of training opportunities developed and led by Lister school administrators, regular check-ins and opportunities for input during standing staff meetings, and feedback provided through formal and informal evaluations.

- Lister leadership stated that their approach to SEL, in particular Zones’ emphasis on identifying and communicating about emotions, paired with the school’s restorative practice efforts, helped lead to a decline in disciplinary actions.

Lister also experienced some **challenges**:

- Gaining staff buy-in took time and was not always an easy process. Some teachers were hesitant about the value of SEL or felt anxious about taking on something that felt new or out of their comfort zone. Establishing buy-in was especially challenging during the principal’s initial years at Lister when she was striving to shift how Lister staff interacted with students and each other.
- Finding the “sweet spot” of focusing on SEL and equity while also meeting academic demands was an ongoing balancing act at Lister, but one that became a little easier to manage as staff saw that SEL could improve, rather than take away from, academic outcomes.

There are several overarching factors that facilitated these successes and helped to mitigate these challenges at Lister:

- Passionate school leaders were the driving force behind Lister’s SEL and equity work, but they strengthened that leadership by elevating teacher leaders and consistently collaborating with their staff. This helped ensure that it was not administrators alone moving Lister’s SEL and equity work forward but the entire school.
- Multiyear refinement was a through line of Lister’s work on both SEL and equity. Interviewees described a steady progression in Lister’s approach to developing instructional resources and implementing professional supports related to SEL and equity and credited that stepwise path as facilitating success.
- School leaders also emphasized the importance of taking a “systems approach” to their work at Lister, so that SEL and equity were embedded throughout the school’s policies and practices rather than sitting in their own standalone silos. Ensuring that SEL had a place in Lister’s teacher evaluation system and prioritizing a commitment to racial equity in a school mission statement are two examples of this approach.
- Lister developed a SEL scope and sequence in house that brought together lessons from multiple sources. Similarly,

the SEL and equity supports that Lister staff received were designed and led by Lister leaders, with the support of external consultants as needed. Though time-intensive, this hands-on approach helped ensure that resources and supports were relevant to Lister's specific context and priorities.

- Lister established schoolwide consistency with regards to SEL. Students and staff used common terminology to communicate about SEL. The SEL scope and sequence was designed to ensure that the same concepts were reinforced across classrooms and evolved as students progressed through each grade.

Finally, during the pandemic, Lister's expectations for SEL and equity remained consistent, with adjustments made for applicability to the virtual space and at-home learning. While virtual learning inevitably stalled some of the school's plans for integrating SEL into academic content, it also opened up some opportunities for connecting with students' families.

### **Key Takeaways About Prioritizing Equity in SEL**

- Committed school leaders drove the SEL and equity work by embedding both throughout school systems, policies, and practices.
- Leaders gained school staff buy-in by elevating teacher leaders to champion SEL and equity, highlighting positive impacts of SEL and equity work, and asking for and using staff feedback on SEL and equity resources and supports.
- Establishing common terminology and shared language about SEL and equity supported consistent and open communication between and among staff and students.
- Designing and developing SEL resources and trainings in house ensured their relevance to the school's context and priorities and allowed for their continued refinement over time.



# APPENDIX

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## Background on Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning

Recognizing the importance of SEL and the potential contributions of both schools and OST programs to youth social and emotional development, The Wallace Foundation launched PSELI. Through PSELI, The Wallace Foundation seeks to explore whether and how children will benefit if adults in schools and OST programs collaborate to improve climate and to foster SEL that is mutually reinforced during and outside the school day, as well as what it takes to do this work.

Starting in summer 2017, The Wallace Foundation awarded annual implementation grants to each of the following six communities: Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. These grants were awarded jointly to school districts and out-of-school-time intermediaries (OSTIs)<sup>7</sup> in each community. These districts and OSTIs then allocated some of these funds to a cohort of schools and OST programs—ranging from five to seven partnerships in each community—to collaborate to improve climate and to foster SEL that is mutually reinforced during and outside the school day.

Altogether, 38 school–OST program partnerships worked to implement SEL programming throughout the school and after-school day during the first four years of PSELI. Another 38 demographically similar school–OST program partnerships from the same six communities continued business as usual and could elect to implement any new SEL of their choosing in the fourth year of PSELI and beyond.

Although each PSELI community designed and implemented its own approach, all 38 school–OST program partnerships in the first four years of PSELI were supposed to focus on the following four approaches to providing SEL for students:

1. Set a positive climate.
2. Offer explicit SEL instruction to students during the school day; SEL instruction during OST programs was optional.
3. Integrate SEL into academic instruction and OST activities.

4. Pursue school-OST partnerships that mutually reinforce SEL practices across the school and OST program day.

The RAND Corporation serves as the research partner on PSELI and is responsible for gathering implementation and outcome data from PSELI participants in each of the six communities. These case studies are part of a series of reports RAND will publish about PSELI. The first report of the series, *Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning* (available at [www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1)), provides more detail on the PSELI initiative.

## Methods for This Case Study

For each of the six case studies in this series, we use with permission the actual names of schools, OST programs, and, in some of the cases, individuals. The case studies are part of a larger mixed-methods study of PSELI over four years in six cities. To select the cases, we first identified sites with unique, high-quality approaches to their SEL work based on interview and observation data from fall 2017 through spring 2019. We then proposed these as candidates for case studies to the district and OSTI leads of PSELI, sometimes changing the site in response to the district and OSTI leads' suggestions. In fall 2019, we had finalized the six case study sites, each highlighting a particular aspect of the initiative (e.g., explicit SEL instruction, strong school-OST partnership). We then expanded our data collection activities at each of these sites to get a more in-depth understanding of their approaches to SEL implementation.

Note that all six cases are in large urban districts that primarily serve students from historically disadvantaged populations. As such, the lessons we glean from the six case studies may not generalize to all elementary schools. Table A.1 documents the types of data we collected for the PSELI study at large and at Lister Elementary specifically.

Details about the survey instruments, observation protocol, interview protocols, and how we analyzed the data we collected are found in the technical appendix of our report here: *Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning* (available at [www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1)).

TABLE A.1

**Data We Drew on for the Case Study at Lister Elementary**

| <b>Data Category</b>  | <b>Fall<br/>2017</b> | <b>Spring<br/>2018</b> | <b>Spring<br/>2019</b> | <b>Fall<br/>2019</b> | <b>Winter<br/>2020</b> | <b>Spring<br/>2020</b> | <b>Spring<br/>2021</b> |
|---|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Observations of instructional time  | ✓                    | ✓                      | ✓                      | ✓                    | ✓                      | ✓                      | —                      |
| Extra observations related to case study topic (e.g., staff meetings, additional classes) |                      |                        |                        | *                    |                        |                        | *                      |
| Staff survey  | ✓<br>(65%)           | ✓<br>(95%)             | ✓<br>(100%)            |                      |                        | ✓<br>(95%)             | ✓<br>(83%)             |
| Interviews of principal and OST program director  | ✓                    | ✓                      | ✓                      | ✓+                   |                        | ✓+                     | ✓+                     |
| Interviews of teachers and OST program instructors  | ✓                    | ✓                      | ✓                      | ✓+                   |                        | ✓                      | ✓+                     |
| Interviews of additional SEL roles (e.g., coaches, SEL leads)                             |                      | ✓                      | ✓                      | ✓                    |                        | ✓                      | ✓                      |
| Interviews of non-instructional staff (e.g., cafeteria worker, secretary)                 |                      |                        |                        | *                    |                        | ✗                      | ✗                      |
| Documents related to SEL  |                      |                        | ✓                      |                      |                        | ✓                      | ✓                      |

NOTES: TPS also provided deidentified administrative records for all school years of the PSELI initiative. The school-specific survey response rates are shown in parentheses. Blank cells mean that the data category was not part of the planned collection at that given time point.

— = not allowed to collect due to COVID-19 restrictions

✗ = dropped to reduce burden on sites during COVID-19.

✓+ = extended data collection focused on case study topic.

\* = collected at case study sites only and not the other six PSELI sites in Tacoma.

# ABBREVIATIONS

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|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| <b>CASEL</b>    | Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning |
| <b>COVID-19</b> | coronavirus disease 2019                                     |
| <b>GAT</b>      | Getting Along Together                                       |
| <b>OST</b>      | out-of-school-time   |
| <b>OSTI</b>     | out-of-school-time intermediary                              |
| <b>PD</b>       | professional development                                     |
| <b>PSELI</b>    | Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative    |
| <b>SEL</b>      | social and emotional learning                                |
| <b>TPS</b>      | Tacoma Public Schools  |
| <b>TWC</b>      | Tacoma Whole Child   |



# ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “What Is SEL?” webpage, undated. As of February 23, 2020: <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>. CASEL has since updated this definition as of October 2020 to emphasize how SEL can advance educational equity and excellence. Our report uses the earlier CASEL definition, because it was the foundational one which most PSELI communities used at the time of the case study work. Equity is a growing focus for many PSELI communities, but this was in the early stages for most, and equity was not a foundational definition of SEL at the outset of PSELI.

<sup>2</sup> *Restorative practices* were described by one Lister staff person as “community circles where students strengthen relationship-building, and restorative conversations where students focus on accountability by identifying needs or instances of harm done and finding ways to repair relationships that have been negatively impacted by harm.”

<sup>3</sup> Whole Child teams (formerly called Tacoma Whole Child Initiative teams) existed at schools throughout the Tacoma Public School district and started meeting prior to PSELI as part of the district’s preexisting Whole Child SEL work.

<sup>4</sup> In this context, *climate* refers to the features of a school or OST environment that youth and adults experience. School climate can include aspects of the physical space, culture, norms, goals, values, and practices. Sources: David Osher and Juliette Berg, *School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning: The Integration of Two Approaches*, State College, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University, January 2018; and Amrit Thapa, Jonathan Cohen, Shawn Guffey, and Ann Higgins-D’Alessandro, “A Review of School Climate Research,” *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 83, No. 3, 2013, pp. 357–385.

<sup>5</sup> Zones of Regulation, “Free Downloadable Handouts,” webpage, undated. As of July 25, 2022: <https://www.zonesofregulation.com/free-downloadable-handouts.html>

<sup>6</sup> Zones of Regulation, “Free Downloadable Handouts,” webpage, undated. As of July 25, 2022: <https://www.zonesofregulation.com/free-downloadable-handouts.html>

<sup>7</sup> OSTIs can take a variety of forms, including a single nonprofit organization or a network of agencies that work together. They carry out such functions as allocating funding, setting standards, monitoring programming quality, and communicating with the public. Some of them directly fund OST programming, but many do not and instead serve a coordinating and organizing function for a community's OST programs.





# ABOUT THIS REPORT

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## **RAND Education and Labor**

This case study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking.

This research was commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, which seeks to support and share effective ideas and practices to improve learning and enrichment opportunities for children and the vitality of the arts for everyone. For more information and research on these and other related topics, please visit its Knowledge Center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org). This report was also made possible, in part, by the support of Tacoma Public Schools. Opinions contained in the report reflect those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of Tacoma Public Schools.

More information about RAND can be found at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). Questions about this case study should be directed to Susannah Faxon-Mills at [sfaxonmi@rand.org](mailto:sfaxonmi@rand.org), and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to [educationandlabor@rand.org](mailto:educationandlabor@rand.org).

**T**he Wallace Foundation's Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative is a six-year initiative that The Wallace Foundation launched in 2017 to explore whether and how children benefit when schools and their out-of-school-time programs partner to improve social and emotional learning (SEL), as well as what it takes to do this work.

According to the Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning, SEL is "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." This case study explores how Lister Elementary School in Tacoma, Washington, established SEL and equity as a nonnegotiable foundation for its work with students, staff, and families.

Lister staff received comprehensive support in their SEL and equity work. This included written SEL lessons that incorporated racial equity, a range of training opportunities developed and led by Lister school administrators, regular check-ins and opportunities for input during standing staff meetings, and feedback provided through formal and informal evaluations. Lister established schoolwide consistency with regards to SEL. Students and staff used common terminology to communicate about SEL. The SEL scope and sequence was designed to ensure that the same concepts were reinforced across classrooms and evolved as students progressed through each grade.

Commissioned by  
The Wallace Foundation

\$24.00

[www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)



RR-A379-9

ISBN-10 1-9774-0997-0  
ISBN-13 978-1-9774-0997-3



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