EPISODE 1

The Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative

LUCAS HELD

Welcome to Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning, a new series of podcasts from The Wallace Foundation. I'm Lucas Held, director of communications at Wallace, and I'm delighted to have you join us today. This podcast series features conversations exploring the findings from the first two years of an initiative in which six communities are exploring whether and if so, how, children can benefit from intentional partnerships between schools and out-of-school time programs to build social and emotional skills and what it takes to actually do this work. This effort is called Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning initiative or what we have affectionately come to call PSELI. The six communities in the initiative are Boston, Dallas, Denver, Palm Beach County, Florida, Tacoma, Washington, and Tulsa, Oklahoma. I want to thank our research partners at the RAND Corporation whose findings and early lessons we'll explore in depth over this series.

The first report, Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning, is available without charge on the Wallace and Rand websites. We hope its findings will be useful, whether you're a district and out-of-school-time provider or a group of both collaborating as well as to policy makers. Today's episode kicks off our podcast series by taking a look at what SEL is, why it's important and what Wallace hoped to learn by creating this initiative. And I'm very pleased to welcome our guest today.

Will Miller, president of the Wallace Foundation, Melissa Schillinger, vice president of practice and programs at the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning or CASEL, and Karen Pittman, co-founder, president and CEO of the Forum for Youth Investment. Thank you again for joining us. So let's start at the beginning. Will, could you tell us about the origins of PSELI? How did Wallace come to invest in an initiative focusing on SEL and including both schools and out-of-school time programs?

WILL MILLER

It's each of our major grant initiatives is intended to achieve two goals. First, we want to help the small number of organizations we can fund

directly improve their capacity to deliver their services. At PSELI these grantees are schools and their out-of-school time partners in the six communities you mentioned. Second, we seek at the same time to help the broader field by developing and sharing credible, useful knowledge from what we learned from our grantees. For this reason, we start the design of each of our initiatives by trying to identify an important unanswered question for the field as a whole, by seeking out and listening to leading practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, others who can help us understand the context for our programmatic strategies.

So what led us to an initiative around partnering between school and out-of-school time providers to provide social, emotional learning? When we planned it five years ago, first, we were hearing growing evidence that social and emotional learning matters. As Harvard's Stephanie Jones puts it, over the past two decades, there's emerged a consensus among those who studied child development, education and health, that social and emotional skills matter for many areas of development, including learning, health, and general wellbeing. Research has shown that skills like persistence, expressing emotion in context, appropriate ways, empathy, and being able to work well with others all matter to employers. And James Heckman has found traits like conscientiousness are just as predictive of long-term outcomes as academic skills. We also knew that high-quality, evidence-based SEL programs can produce positive outcomes for students, including improved behavior, attitudes, and academic performance. And that's the cumulative impact of multiple experiences over time that produces these benefits.

And finally, we've learned that the development of social and emotional skills for young people takes place in multiple settings, the three primary ones being family, school, and after-school programs. We suspected, but weren't sure, that greater alignment in what the adults do and the two organized settings, school and afterschool, might benefit young people, particularly those who need the most support. Given all of this, the question that emerged was could improving and aligning social and emotional learning across schools and out-of-school time programs be done. And if so, would children benefit. Both our community partners and Wallace had the help of experts like CASEL and the Forum for Youth Investment to design and implement our strategies and data was used to inform ongoing improvement. However, in PSELI, we're interested in more than quantifying student benefits. Equally important is the question, what does it take to align and carry out SEL programs in these different settings? What helps, what gets in the way? If you know

something like SEL is helpful, that's good, but that doesn't take you very far, unless you also know how to carry it out. And that's an area where there's been far less guidance available.

LUCAS HELD   So Melissa, CASEL has really been perhaps the leading voice in the nation on SEL for decades. And we know that you recently updated how you define SEL. So tell us a little bit about that evolution and maybe share your current thinking.

MELISSA SCHLINGER   Sure. Yes. We have recently released an updated definition of SEL and we were motivated to do that by the growing body of research that has, um, come to light that we wanted to reflect in our definition. And we've been working on this for several years now. We also wanted to make sure that we were more explicitly communicating about the connection between SEL, how it can play a role in equity. Um, we've lifted up certain themes in our new definition, around promoting agency, identity, and sense of belonging. And we also wanted to make sure we were highlighting the important role of the environment, that when we talk about SEL, we're not simply talking about a list of skills, but that we're also talking about the environments in which those competencies are developed, whether it is the classroom, the school, the community, or the home, and that when we really look at this comprehensive approach, we can really understand the systemic nature of social and emotional learning.

LUCAS HELD   Well, that's terrific. Thank you, Melissa. And, um, speaking of a systemic perspective, uh, Karen has as co-founder, president and CEO of the Forum for Youth Investment, you've worked tirelessly to promote a kind of systems view of youth development. And tell us a little bit about why, uh, partnerships between schools and out-of-school time programs, uh, might be important.

KAREN PITTMAN   Well partnerships between schools and out-of-school time programs are important because we understand that learning happens everywhere. Um, but in particular, we understand that young people need a range of learning approaches. From the formal approaches that you have to academic content and classrooms to more flexible approaches that you often find in both sort of elective and extracurricular activities in schools and in youth organizations where young people have a bit more flexibility to lead with their interests, uh, to figure out their own peer groups, uh, and to work at their own pace. So both of these kinds of

experiences, in addition to the purely informal learning experiences that you have in libraries and museums, all contribute to young people's development of a strong sense of competencies, but also to that identity and agency that Melissa just commented on. So the partnerships are critical.

LUCAS HELD

Karen, just following up on that, is the importance of the partnerships that students are getting more time and experiences, or is the importance that there is the opportunity for complementarity, uh, and alignment.

KAREN PITTMAN

The, the importance of the partnership is intentionality. I would say, um, young people in their families, especially the more young people and families have means, will find their ways into these various settings. So clearly they will go to school, but the more families are in communities that have a rich array of these kind of, uh, sort of non- formal and informal settings. And the more they can navigate their young people towards them. This is a natural thing that happens, um, in, in, during the school day, after school.

And certainly in the summer months, um, the partnership part comes from our understanding of the need to really be much more intentional about first, finding out whether all young people have access to this array of learning opportunities, because we know that equity is a big issue in this space. And then the partnership part also comes from the fact that these environments, while they really are committed to the same things, they lead differently.

So, uh, Melissa mentioned the idea of learning environments, um, and the importance of identity and agency, uh, and that sense of belonging out-of-school, afterschool, community programs often because they don't have the academic mandate start with those ideas in mind. And also because they're voluntary, if young people don't feel that they identify, if they don't feel that they belong, if they don't feel that it's meeting their interest, especially by the time they're adolescents, they just won't show up.

So obviously both care about learning and development, both care about the idea that we want young people to build a strong and balanced set of competencies, but it's because of these two kinds of organizations have complimentary ways and approaches and complimentary ways to be accountable, uh, to families, uh, and to other

community partners. That being more intentional about how to partner is so important.

LUCAS HELD

So, Melissa, how does that resonate with you, Karen, um, speaks about complementarity and leading differently in different accountability systems. How does that play out in the SEL space?

MELISSA SCHLINGER

Yes, we a hundred percent agree with how Karen is describing this. And we know that, um, these competencies are interrelated and that when we are talking about promoting these competencies, we know that it's not simply about the youth, but also about the adults that are interacting with youth. Um, it's about how the adults are thinking about their own social, emotional, and cultural competence, how they are interacting with each other and modeling for youth, what competence, social and emotional health looks like and how they're creating that environment, as Karen said, where kids want to be and want to learn and want to engage.

LUCAS HELD

So that leads me to a follow up question for both of you. You've talked about the importance of a holistic perspective of the multiple domains where children grow and develop. Where do we stand as, as a nation? You know, how unusual is, uh, this, uh, experiment in PSELI bringing together schools and out-of-school time programs, uh, it, Karen let's start with you and then go to Melissa.

KAREN PITTMAN

I think the opportunity to really have this conversation at the system level is both important and unique and timely. So we know that when you come into communities at the building level, um, depending on sort of how that community comes together, how integrated that neighborhood is, how much ownership that neighborhood has of its school you may find these kinds of arrangements happening. But for PSELI to really come in at the system level and say, we need this partnership to happen to make sure that we're really getting to scale with these opportunities. And I think secondly, as Melissa, Melissa just mentioned to come in, focusing on the adults was also critically important. Uh, the piece that I think we get to when we focus on the adults is an incredible opportunity to really, again, live out what we learned from the science, which is all adults matter, all settings matter, all learning approaches matter.

So the setting, if it happens to me, the cafeteria can be a place where not just learning and development happens generally, but where social

and emotional competencies can actually be practiced and reinforced, the playground can be a place where that happens. Now, those places are not places that we think academic learning happens, but they are a places where social and emotional skills are demonstrated. They are places where leadership has demonstrated. They are places where young people very much are building and testing out their sense of identity and agency, just because they're being lightly supervised and it's not leading with content.

The more we understand that the school really is a microcosm of a community and that young people are experiencing all the time with lots of different adults the more we really can optimize that whole concept of the school as community and help young people build and test skills in hopefully a safe environment that they can then take out into the larger community.

LUCAS HELD

Terrific. I remember reading Karen that students actually feel less safe in the playground or in the locker room than they do in the classroom, which I think speaks powerfully to your point about taking a system perspective. Um, Melissa, so Karen has spoken about the system perspective being particularly new and also the importance of focusing on adults on the learner, on the setting. Um, how about from your perspective, where, where, where does this effort situate?

MELISSA SCHLINGER

Yeah, I think this PSELI project is really important to try to establish what it looks like to be intentional with these important partnerships, uh, with community partners and afterschool providers and the school day. And the interesting thing about PSELI and, and also what's happening around the nation is that, um, we've seen from the recent events from the pandemic, just how important these things are. While SEL was already on the rise in terms of its popularity, for lack of a better word, uh, the pandemic and the issues, and our current events around racial injustices have revealed just how critically important these competencies are and how critically important partnerships with communities and families are.

And so the PSELI project was well timed in that we were examining these things closely and being intentional about them. And I believe that the nation, if not, the world has woken up to just how important it is to be thinking about our social emotional competence, our ability to manage emotions, manage stress, manage conflict, um, build empathy, build

relationships, make ethical and responsible decisions. All of those things have really been tested. And, um, and in these cases where districts have been focusing in on this for a while, it's been helpful to them to be able to rely on what they've been teaching and to know that their community partners are right there to support the many, many needs that families have demonstrated that they've been challenged with during this time.

LUCAS HELD

So Karen, uh, Melissa is bringing up two points. I think one is that the COVID-19 pandemic has, uh, in a sense increased interest in beyond, uh, the high level that it was at in SEL. And I think she's also pointed to, uh, perhaps the idea that the partnership, uh, might actually be helpful in this terrible time. Does that, uh, do those two thoughts resonate with you?

KAREN PITTMAN

Absolutely. I think one of the things that we grasp immediately is that in the, in the midst of this massive disruption to young people and family schedules came opportunity. And the opportunity came quite frankly, when all of a sudden out-of-school time was all the time. I mean, we think when we even used the language out of school or afterschool, we're setting up this power dynamic that says learning, official learning, formal learning happens in this building and in this time period, and then young people can go out and where, and when they go after school, um, is where this other stuff happens.

And now we've moved on to really be able to say the whole point of helping young people build these skills and competencies, all kinds of competencies, academic, social, emotional, and cognitive competencies is so they actually can have a sense of agency, they can have a sense of identity so that they can be successful. So that through story of not just leaving social SEL over here as a curriculum to bring in and teach when you get a chance, but pulling it all the way through to say these are critical skills and competencies that have to be mixed in with the content, knowledge and skill building that happens in schools and, and it's practiced and happening in other places so that young people get to the end game, which is, they feel like they are competent young people who have a sense of agency who have a sense of identity and who belong.

LUCAS HELD

Will. Can you talk a little more about the initiative and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? How have the participating communities been affected by this?

WILL MILLER

It's definitely had an impact as it has on almost everything else. The six communities have had to provide emergency childcare, create virtual activities and tools, develop reopening plans and help to support, not just children, but the adults in their communities. Both the communities and Wallace have had to adapt. Some planned program activities needed to be abandoned. Others had to be postponed as a funder. We've provided flexibility to our grantees to adjust their strategies and repurpose funding in response to critical local needs created by this crisis. Many parents are concerned about the impact on the development of life skills of their kids, missing the chance to work together in classrooms and afterschool activities. Teachers and principals are working mightily to maintain a supportive learning environment for students while also attending to the needs of the adults in the system and district and state policy-makers are increasingly concerned about the social emotional impact on children's learning of the stress trauma and uncertainty brought on by the pandemic.

We also know that COVID has exacerbated historic inequities across many fronts, including in education, and that we, as a country, must do more to address our national legacy of racial injustice. The six communities involved in PSELI were focused on equity before COVID. And many of them are now thinking about how they will incorporate SEL into their future equity plans, given the linkage between it and academic success. Our hope is that the PSELI communities can leverage the skills and partnerships they have built to help navigate and recover from the pandemic in ways that more effectively support learning and address the local implications of our national conversation on racial justice. We're looking forward to being able to share many more lessons about this in the coming years.

LUCAS HELD

And let me, uh, uh, close by building on that point you made Karen about creating optimal learning conditions. I think one of the emerging ideas that we hope to gather from PSELI is how this can be done. So Melissa, and then we'll close with you, Karen. Um, what kinds of lessons do you think might come out on implementation and do you think there will be an appetite, uh, for these insights?

MELISSA SCHLINGER   Yeah. We, um, at CASEL have been studying social and emotional learning for 25 years now. And 10 years ago, we launched our Collaborating Districts Initiative to answer those very questions, Lucas, about how does this actually happen at a systemic level? And what we've learned over the last decade is that there are some critical early steps that are foundational to a sustained effort that involve engaging stakeholders and committing to SEL and building that back, that basic knowledge about what SEL is and how you communicate about it, how you provide professional learning.

Secondly, we know that there's a lot of work to be done with the adults themselves, so that they have the SEL expertise that they can reflect on their own social and emotional learning and cultural competence, and so that they themselves can build strong communities of trust among each other. Thirdly, there are some really important strategies for promoting social, emotional learning for young people that happen during the school day in the classroom, also throughout the building and in addition in the community and at home. And that lastly that all of these efforts should be examined and evaluated and continuously improved through intentional, uh, analysis of the data.

LUCAS HELD   Great. Thank you, Melissa. Karen, how about you? What kind of, uh, implementation lessons do you think will be most helpful from this effort?

KAREN PITTMAN   Learning environments may lead with different things, but in the end they have to do five things. They have to really make sure they're creating strong relationships between adults and young people and young people as peers. They have to really focus on this sense of belonging and safety. Not take it for granted, but really check on it for all young people, because we know that varies, and that's a key piece when we're looking at equity, they have to introduce rich instructional content. It doesn't have to be academic, but it has to be there. If we're really creating optimal environments for learning and development, they aren't just drop-in centers. They are places where young people are being challenged with content. We have to make sure that we're providing the kind of individual supports that may be needed for young people, which means you have to get to know them in order to make sure that there are so there's a system of supports available if needed.

What we have learned from PSELI or demonstrated with PSELI is the importance of bringing that same set of non-negotiables into every

setting where young people are spending their time, making sure that adults understand at the very basic level, what practices they can bring into all of their work that help them move towards those goals. Even if they happen to be in a classroom in which they're teaching, you know, algebra versus they're on a basketball court, we need them, but we need adults to not just think I'm teaching a technique, but really be able to understand and assess how to optimize the particular setting that they're working in with young people and do that in a way that corresponds to the group of young people they are working with. This really for me, means that we're coming back to put much more emphasis on giving adults the tools, the, the support and the respect that they need to really assess and improve the environments that they're creating for young people.

LUCAS HELD   Well, speaking of tools and support, this has been an incredibly rich conversation. Thank you.