



EPISODE 2

Developing Adults' Capacity to Promote Social and Emotional Learning

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 policymakers.

Today's episode will focus on why developing the social and emotional skills of adults is important. And this first public report on the PSELI initiative, RAND found something that might be just a little counter-intuitive: that to help young people develop social and emotional skills, we might actually need to focus on the adults first. So to help shed some light on why this perhaps puzzling finding might be the case, and also how this was carried out in one community, that's Palm Beach County,

I'm delighted to welcome our three guests, all of whom are from Palm Beach County. We have with us Kristin Rulison, who is SEL manager for the Palm Beach County school district. We have Knellee Bisram, who is SEL specialist at Primetime Palm Beach County. That's an intermediary organization that provides supports for high-quality programs toward positive youth development and out-of-school time programs. And we

also have Charlie Peterman, who is cafeteria manager at the CrossPointe Elementary School. So thank you all each so much for joining us today. Uh, let's kick it off with Kristin. So Kristen, from the school district's perspective, when thinking about building SEL skills in students, why, why one start with the adults?

And I'll just mention that, uh, in its, uh, first, uh, evaluation report RAND found that for professional development, topics were particularly common across the six cities. One was defining and giving an overview of SEL. The second was activities to help students build social and emotional skills, that is, activities to help, uh, adults, uh, help students. Third, helping teachers build their own skills and fourth, ways to actually integrate SEL into, uh, instruction and other activities. So tell us a bit about what kind of skills that Palm Beach County was trying to build and why.

KRISTEN RULISON

So something that, you know, we believed, and that was really important that SEL skills benefit everyone, not just, um, kids and youth. In fact, when we were coming up with our own definition of SEL as a community, we were very intentional to include adults in our definition. Um, and that's because if we're going to ask, you know, kids and youth to practice these SEL skills, then as adults, we need to model this, um, you know, that phrase action speaks louder than words. If I'm going to say that, you know, we need to get along, but, um, a colleague of mine walks in and I start yelling at her in front of the class, they're going to see my actions versus what I'm teaching, right? So I'm also in addition to the modeling of the SEL, you know, teaching can be very stressful at times and we know that stress affects our health and wellbeing. So we wanted to make sure that we were also spending time to really promote adult self-care practices and help educators be able to get those strategies to cope with stress and manage their own emotions. Um, and our goal was to create the space in the work environment where adults can cultivate practice and reflect on their own SEL skills while feeling supported, um, valued and empowered.

LUCAS HELD

Really interesting. So, um, Knellee, let's, let's go over to you and does that sound familiar to do take a similar strategy with the out-of-school time providers that you work with, uh, uh, from the intermediary.

KNELLEEE BISRAM

Yes, definitely. We've had a really heavy focus on building the adult, uh, interpersonal and interpersonal skills. So, um, in the out-of-school time

space, I would say, um, so we offered an SEL Academy where like 60%, uh, over about two thirds of the emphasis was on, um, really having an experiential and an inquiry-based approach to, um, cultivating those skills from the inside out. So this idea embodied presence. And embodied, um, social, emotional intelligence was at the core of, um, you know, the, the, the self-care of the adult, the ability to internalize model. Um, and then really what that did was made it a lot easier for the other learning that was happening around delivering, um, explicit instruction or how to integrate SEL all of the time. It made it much easier, um, and gave them more confidence because they were able to relate on a personal level to what SEL meant to them.

LUCAS HELD

You're reminding me is that, uh, in psychoanalytic training, all psychoanalysts actually have to go through their own analysis so they experience, uh, they experience what it's like. So it sounds like there's something, uh, similar and that kind of building a foundation. I mean, the phrase you use Knellee was embodied presence and Kristin, you talked about action speaking, uh, speaking louder than words. This though is a little bit different. I think then, um, equipping teachers to teach math or history, was this a difficult, um, idea to introduce?

KNELLEEE BISRAM

For us? It wasn't difficult because we understand the nature of social and emotional learning. Um, and I think maybe on the front end, it was about having the patience to give them the experiences so that they could understand for themselves why that, uh, approach is important. So, and, and I would, I would also say that it wasn't an either or proposition. It was a both. And so it's, um, building that foundation of embodied, understanding and practice using a trauma-informed approach, a whole-person approach, um, where the adults themselves begin to feel included and understand how belonging and equity even kind of arise from that. And then with that understanding, scaffolding on top of that the skills necessary to teach young people how to develop those skills themselves, but from adults who are themselves, um, at least attempting with some degree of vulnerability, I should mention as well, right? Because we're not perfect to embody these skills. So then it becomes real. It becomes, there's a lot more integrity of purpose and, and it's much more sustainable as well.

LUCAS HELD

Kristen does that resonate?

KRISTEN RULISON

Absolutely. SEL is, it's a journey. It's not something that you master at once. Um, and you know, we really just want to create this environment where everyone really understands the importance of reflection. It's not about being perfect or being, you know, um, a perfectionist at something and getting it right every time. But when things don't go right, do you take time to stop and reflect on, okay, what could I do better next time?

LUCAS HELD

Great. Well, let's, let me jump ahead to, um, Charlie, so Charlie, you're cafeteria manager at Crosspoint Elementary, you've been there for, uh, nine years, uh, undoubtedly seeing many students and you requested, um, SEL training for your cafeteria staff. Um, so why was that, uh, what, what did you hope they would, uh, uh, they would learn?

CHARLIE PETERMAN

Well, our school is really, um, very active in trying to make the whole school a community. And unfortunately the cafeteria and other departments are not available to go to the many workshops, um, because of the time, time, um, management. So I really felt for my staff, um, we needed a team building and I love the concept of the, uh, SEL learning. I wanted them to have more empathy toward each other because they are big role models. The children come through, we have, you know, on a normal basis, we have over 600 children that come through and they see what we're doing and how we're reacting to each other. And I felt that it was really important for my staff to one, feel part of the community of the school, so that we all had the same vision. We're all on basically speaking the same language throughout the day. So the kids see it no matter where they go. Also, I wanted them to, to really learn how to communicate better with each other and have a more empathy towards the adults there, they show a lot of empathy for the children, but we've got to show it to each other as well.

LUCAS HELD

That gets back to, uh, what Kristen was saying about, um, actions speaking louder than words and that kind of modeling. How, how long was the, uh, workshop or series of workshops and what, what, what kind of impact did it make?

CHARLIE PETERMAN

I will be honest. We had, um, four workshops. They were an hour long. Um, and at first they were a little resistant because I think Knellee said, you know, if you don't really understand their process, you're really not sure what you're getting into. They had did a lot of team building one of my favorites because I have a very diverse, uh, group, um, of

employees. It was the, um, where everyone looked at each other, they had a partner and they had to look at each other for a minute and just realize that it doesn't matter, that we're all different looking. We all feel the same.

LUCAS HELD

So the, there is power In silence. Um, uh, Kristen, I mean, oftentimes, uh, cafeteria might be kind of overlooked in the district SEL efforts. So from your perspective, uh, from, uh, how, why is this and why is it so important that, um, these sort of non-classroom spaces are part of the considered part of the community?

KRISTEN RULISON

You know, every adult on campus, um, has a very important role in a child's life, and they might not even realize it. In fact, as Charlie was talking, um, one of the first adults that my own daughter sees every day when she goes to school is the cafeteria manager. And I kid you not, but she calls Ms. Karen her best friend, because Ms. Karen is the one that greets her every morning when she goes to get breakfast. And, you know, the school should become this family and it's your home away from home, right? We want all the kids and even staff to feel safe and feel like that this is their family and that they have this sense of belonging. Um, so I think it is really important that every adult you don't know who's going to be the first adult to greet a child that day.

It could be the attendance clerk in the front office. It could be the bus driver. Um, and not only that, you know, so often we work within our grade levels as teachers. Um, what has been really nice about this approach that we've tried with SEL and trying, when we can bring everyone together, you really get to know the people that you work with and you see every day, um, and you get to form those deeper relationships and it makes the workplace, you know, a happier place to be. And when people are happy, they perform better in their jobs. And it also helps with employee retention.

LUCAS HELD

And, uh, Knellee does, there's this idea of sort of the community also applying the OST realm?

KNELLEEE BISRAM

Absolutely. I mean, um, so I was actually involved in the, in the four sessions that Charlie's talking about, and I remember facilitating that activity, and it was, there were tears. Right. Um, and, and I remember thinking after that, um, experience how important it is to build an ecosystem and the ecosystem expands beyond school day, it expands

into OST, which is like the whole premise for this project. Um, and, you know, in Palm Beach County, it even expands to the larger community of, um, providers, um, that are serving youth in some capacity. So much of what we're talking about. We have expanded into the community, um, by, especially in the area of adult SEL, um, as a means to, to really embodying and I guess, shifting the culture of, of our, just our way of being. And I'm hoping that over time, that, that begins to someone what Kristen was mentioning that begins to really strengthen relationships, which was really the foundation for everything. Right.

LUCAS HELD

And you use the word, uh, ecosystem. So I think one of the questions is how these ways of modeling behavior can be reinforced and sustained. Obviously staff changes, new folks, come in, come out, um, retirements. How, how, what, how have each of you thought about the question of, um, sustainment and maybe start with you, uh, Kristen, and then, uh, Charlie and Knellee.

KRISTEN RULISON

Yeah. So that's something that, um, we've been working on with Prime Time and really talking and thinking about how do we keep up with new employees as they start, and how can we embed social, emotional learning into part of their onboarding, um, pro our own. So we've been looking at that. And then again, even if you aren't a new employee, you know, this concept of, it's not a one and done experience, right. We're always reflecting, we're always growing. So how do we keep that going? Um, and we've, you know, there's so much with SEL to do and focus on, it's almost like an onion. You can keep peeling layers back and go deeper and deeper. Um, and so we've been incorporating, you know, there's different practices now that we have as part of our culture, um, where, you know, we've started SEL signature practices, such as a welcoming ritual, um, and engaging practices and ending meetings with an optimistic closure and embedding these practices into our everyday life. Um, not just for adults, but also for students.

LUCAS HELD

So it's really that kind of, um, ritualization that, uh, you're relying on in part to sustain these things kind of weeding it into the fabric. How about you Knellee?

KNELLEEE BISRAM

Um, something that was really simple, sort of simple mantra that we tried to, um, invoke in the OST space, and I believe this is also happening in the school day space, is that what really shifts behavior is daily practice. So it could be something small, but it has to be

intentional, meaningful, and explicit. Um, and it has to be something that, um, where there's a common understanding and language around.

So whether it's signature practices, I'm, I'm, uh, also a mindfulness trainer. So I'm a huge advocate for sort of the inside out approach to SEL, which is this, this idea of embodying presence. So, and we can do that anywhere with our breath. So, um, we, one practice that we use is called a power pause, and that has really been transformative because it's literally coming into the present moment, wherever we are whenever we are. So if nothing else, this idea that we are in control of how we practice SEL at any moment really also allows us to have some agency around, um, you know, we don't need to attend to the lengthy training, or if we don't have time to participate in coaching, if we could hold onto one practice that really can carry us, then it, it really starts to shift the culture, um, not just into this immediate school community, but in the broader community.

LUCAS HELD

Which then implies as giving people a practice they can hold onto and use implies, then that you've invested in building a kind of common understanding of what those practices are, what the tools are. I know that's something that also emerged in the RAND study. So did Charlie, how, uh, how, how were you thinking of keeping this, uh, keeping this going?

CHARLIE PETERMAN

Uh, actually it was such a success. Um, my employees actually said that helped them in their home life also. So we have kind of, yeah, they actually requested, um, when we can to have more, more training, which I was really pleased about. And, um, one of the things that we do in the morning, I have a five minute meeting and I ask everybody to give me their word for the, that, that morning, that day. Um, that way, if we know somebody is, um, not having such a great day, we can extend that a little bit more empathy towards them, and we know how everybody's feeling, and we try to just lift the ones up that are not having a great day.

LUCAS HELD

Thanks. That's helpful. Let me ask, uh, Kristin of course we've, since March been, uh, swept up and the impact of COVID-19, how, how has this effected the district's work in SEL?

KRISTEN RULISON

You know, it actually, I think has helped, um, kind of put a spotlight on SEL and the importance of SEL, believe it or not. Um, I think everyone was really concerned about everyone's, um, wellbeing and mental health

during this time that we actually had a lot of adults reaching out and asking for help and the schools that already had some of these, um, systems and rituals and practices in place. It was really neat to see that they were able to then transfer this into, um, a virtual. Um, and we saw that even though in the spring, we weren't all be able to be together in the same room and we were meeting through, um, Google meet, we still had those relationships.

We still knew a lot about each other, so we could call and check in on each other, checking on their families, um, and really not just practice our own self-care, but help and make sure that everyone else's wellbeing and everybody else was doing good at that time. I think too, for principals, um, the principals that have really been leading with that SEL lens, I think it really helped them know how to start with their staff's wellbeing first and making sure that they were all okay. And really being able to continue to build on those, um, relationships.

LUCAS HELD

Sounds like you're in the process of, uh, building these skills in effect build some social capital between, uh, between the adults. I'm seeing some head nodding from Knellee and Charlie, anything you guys would want to add on that COVID question?

KNELLEEE BISRAM

That was beautifully said, and, and we experienced the same thing and OST, I mean, I think the words I would use are prosilience, and resilience. I think we invested in prosilience, and resilience is kind of like storing up right for when the storm comes. And when COVID happened, we heard everywhere, um, practitioners and directors in the out-of-school-time space saying, we're so glad we learned these skills because we are really using them right now, if we weren't serious about them before, we're really using them now, um, in the out-of-school time space, um, because there was an in-person school for a very long time. So it was the end of the semester. And then even over the summer, we had to pivot and adapt a lot to support, um, not just socially and emotionally, but also financially helping by offering stipends to practitioners, to stay engaged in professional learning, which, which really worked well. Um, and so that was sort of an indirect way to keep them, um, in the fold, uh, in a way where they were continually having their self-care needs met. Um, you know, we use, as I mentioned, a trauma-informed kind of mind-body approach, which, which they really appreciated. Um, we came out with a self-care challenge that was made available. It's an on-demand video series that was made available and it was highly utilized. Um, and,

and the other thing that we learned is that we have to offer, um, some variety in our professional learning because the world is online. And so we pivoted to, to virtual in-person live, but also created some self-paced options because I'm in the out-of-school time space, you know, there are challenges with scheduling, there's high turnover. And so that allowed us to be to, um, to be more inclusive of those who are missing out on professional learning before to really be able to benefit.

LUCAS HELD

So different entry points. Um, Charlie, do you want to add anything?

CHARLIE PETERMAN

I think something, if we try to find something good that has come out of the pandemic is I think with the social, emotional learning, those of us that had a base and those are learning, um, I think we have learned how to communicate with each other and also listen, really listen to what the other person is saying, because we don't have the hands on and we're all on the mask on. So you, it's hard to read facial expressions. So I really feel like we're all learning to use our words more effectively.

LUCAS HELD

Speaking of using words effectively, um, we want to just give each of you, uh, a quick chance to offer any advice to counterparts across the country who, uh, are thinking about, um, intensifying their SEL work. So let let's start with, um, uh, Knellee, then go to Charlie and Kristin, what, uh, what bit of advice would you give a colleague having been through this intense, uh, multi-year, uh, PSELI initiative?

KNELLEEE BISRAM

Hmm. So there are three things that come to mind. Um, one we talked about, we can't teach what we don't practice, inside out approach to SEL is what works. Um, secondly, patience, especially if you're going to do seven to seven approach, um, because we need time to build relationships, you know, and, and, and that's foundational. So it's, it's, it's a marathon. It's not a, it's not a sprint. And then thirdly, close to my heart, designed with equity in mind on the front end. Um, so that the expression and the expression of SEL is more organic, more diverse, and it promotes while we're building the SEL skills. We're also promoting justice and inclusion.

LUCAS HELD

Great. Thanks. Um, let's go to Charlie. What, what advice for a colleague, uh, cafeteria manager?

CHARLIE PETERMAN

My biggest advice is, is that they should look into SEL and bring it to their team and the cafeteria, and they will definitely see a difference. Um, I find that you, if you live more mindfully are aware of other people and your own self-awareness and your actions. So I would highly suggest it every opportunity that I really believe that all cafeteria managers should bring this to their team.

LUCAS HELD

Thanks. And let's go to Kristen.

KRISTEN RULISON

So start and continue with the adults. Um, and remember that even after you lay that foundation with the adults around SEL, it's ongoing and to continue ways to embed that. So it becomes part of your everyday practice. Um, as well as I would say, think about SEL as a four-year project of getting started. Um, and you almost need to go slow, it could be a little overwhelming at first where you're like, Oh my goodness, there's so much to do. So really think about what are our goals for the next four years and come up with like a four-year, multi-year plan so that you take on different aspects across those four years. And that way, you can go deep and you're not trying to do everything at once. And that really then involves more time for self-reflection and practice, which is key to this work.

LUCAS HELD

Well, terrific advice from our, uh, expert panel who have indeed, uh, uh, experienced this from the inside out. And we'd very much appreciate their wisdom. Thank you.