



## EPISODE 4

# The Role of Coaches in Promoting 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 PSEL. 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 the role of coaching in SEL instruction. And I'm really pleased to welcome our guests. We have Colleen Galvin Labbe who is lead social and emotional learning instructional coach at Boston public schools. And we have Kimberley Williams. She's the former principal of Joyce Kilmer school in Boston, and is now serving as Boston public schools transformation school leader at Edison K through eight. And thank you both very much for joining me. So during the first two years of the PSEL initiative, our communities found that having designated SEL coaches made a big difference in helping schools and OST programs deliver high quality SEL instruction. And in fact, RAND found that site leaders that is principals and out of school time site

leaders, both value coaches, more than other forms of support. So it was particularly valuable.

So let's start by taking a closer look at what an SEL coach does and also who's being coached. So let's start with you, Kimberley. So when you were former principal at Joyce Kilmer school in Boston, uh, Colleen was your coach. Uh, so what did she do to help you?

**KIMBERLEY  
WILLIAMS**

Hi, uh, thank you, Lucas. Thank you for having us. I'm really excited to be here. Um, I'm especially excited to be able to talk about coaching, uh, in support of SEL in schools. Um, I have to tell you, Colleen was, uh, invaluable, uh, to me into the Kilmer school. Uh, I think while we all understand the importance of social, emotional learning and how it prepares students to be self-regulated to deal with their emotions, to have positive strategies that they can use way beyond, um, in, in our particular instance, the K to eight years, but in every aspect of their life, um, as a school leader, I'm always juggling multiple hats, multiple jobs, you know, at any given moment, I could be the custodian and the secretary. Um, obviously both of them do their jobs well, and I appreciate them, but you never know what the day will bring. And so, um, balancing the many demands of, you know, being an instructional leader and ensuring such a critical component of our work SEL happens. Having a coach just makes that possible. It really makes it practical.

**LUCAS HELD**

And, and specifically just to follow up, Kimberley, what, what difference did the coaching make in your work? How did it change, uh, your work or strengthen it?

**KIMBERLEY  
WILLIAMS**

Sure. Uh, Colleen would come to the school at least one day a week, um, that would allow her to give direct support to teachers. Um, she supported me in our social emotional learning action plan, which was monitored by our social, emotional learning leadership team at the school. So the leadership team would meet once a month. Colleen would not only come to those meetings, but she'd help me as a school leader monitor a multi-step action plan, which allowed us to embed SEL in everything that we did across the building. So she would, um, in addition to that, she would also support our teachers directly in their rollout of the SEL curriculum. So she might be on the ground, um, supporting circles in classrooms, giving teachers guidance and support on how to improve or how to troubleshoot or deal with an issue in real

time. And then one of our key levers was she helped us to incorporate common SEL language throughout our entire school, so that our specialists and support staff also played a role in how SEL, uh, move throughout the building.

**LUCAS HELD**

That's really helpful. So individual coaching for you, coaching for teachers and a kind of common language to, uh, unite these efforts. Uh, so Colleen you've, we've, we've heard from Kimberley. Um, how do you think about your, your work as, as a coach? What, what, what does being a coach mean for SEL?

**COLLEEN GALVIN  
LABBE**

It's very intertwined, you know, between working, you know, as part of the grant, as part of the district, so system level, um, but then also really the direct support to the schools, which is where the meat and potatoes are. You know, so instructional coaching in this case, I am coaching specifically around supporting the school-wide goals of implementation. And as we know, you know, system wide plans always look beautiful and wonderful, but implementation of something is much more difficult and messy. You're dealing with, you know, the resources of time and people and materials. So it's really, my job is to kind of synthesize all those things, to help create a meaningful action plan that is authentic to the school and support the school-wide goals of implementation. In this case, those three goals were implementation of an SEL curriculum.

In this case, that's open circle. integration of SEL. So, um, through the structures and routines of the classrooms, but also integrating it across academics and, um, at the Kilmer that was around using the BPS SEL standards to help write goals, uh, we started that with integrating those in their writing units and it has grown across all academic areas. And then the third as Kimberley mentioned, was integrating the SEL aligned practice. So that, that common SEL is being used by all staff, both in and out of school. That includes the Playworks coach, um, and our other community partners that work with students from the Kilmer before school and afterschool. And that's really where you're seeing, um, that through-line that seamless SEL instruction, uh, for students throughout the day.

**LUCAS HELD**

So it sounds like a lot of focus on, uh, implementation. I think one of the things, your comment raises is it's easy to put down a plan that looks beautifully structured, but they're likely to be issues that, uh, uh, come up. Um, either one of you want to share, uh, a kind of specific thing that

came up and, uh, uh, to which you through the coaching kind of thought through a solution or helped a group of teachers.

**COLLEEN GALVIN  
LABBE**

Sure. I can think of, um, specifically, you know, number one, I'm an educator. I have multiple licenses and all different areas, um, including administration, I've worked for the past 10 years in the Boston public schools. So that right there uniquely positioned me to earn the trust of my fellow teachers in the building. And I think that's something that is really, really important, you know, just from the aspect of hiring coaches, instructional coaches, you want people who are going to be able to be, you know, not evaluators, but peer to peer coaches, because for example, um, in the, in the goal of integrating SEL into academics, I needed to be able to work with teams of teachers and say, you know, because automatically, if it sounds like it's one more thing yet, another thing that we're asking teachers to do, and one more chunk of work to make happen, you know, to impact student learning. Um, so I had the unique ability to be able to go into without the principal, um, go into common planning time meetings with colleagues, my peers, and model, and talk about what that looks like.

You know, I, I always start with, you're already doing it. We're just going to identify where you're doing it and strengthen it, and then monitor some progress, you know, create some goals and monitor practice along the way. It's also a private relationship, so people can speak freely and again, earning their trust. Part of that work is around showing them that I'm competent. You know, this is not just about SEL about everything we're doing and in this case, it's around instruction and academics. So I could, you know, share my own writing units and point out where the SEL objectives live. I can model a guided reading lesson and point out where the SEL lives and help create goals.

So I think just having had the experience of being a teacher in a classroom, being a specialist, um, and an instructional coach, um, in different leadership roles across the district, definitely helped with building that trust. I would argue if you do not have that trust and build those relationships with the teachers in the building, you are literally not going to get anything done, not anything meaningful, you know, so it's around building the capacity and empowering teachers. Um, and that is the difficult part, but it's also the most exciting part. And the funnest part for me.

**LUCAS HELD**

Really interesting example, you've spoken about building trust about connecting the new practices to things that people are already doing. Uh, and, and at sometimes said that, uh, adult learning is really built on the idea of connecting new ideas to, uh, existing, uh, existing ideas. And I'm also gathering that in a sense you're helping people, uh, overcome their own resistance to doing, as you said, one more thing. Um, really interesting. So Kimberley, uh, from your perspective, any kind of specific, uh, example, uh, where we're kind of talking through something with a coach helped, uh, helped you engineer a solution.

**KIMBERLEY WILLIAMS**

I'm sure I could think of, uh, several examples. Uh, one thing that connects back to what Colleen just said was trying to get fidelity of implementation across multiple stakeholders, right? So I want both the teachers, the out-of-school-time staff, a support staff within the building that don't, aren't responsible for classrooms themselves, but support the whole building to get on board. I would say I sat down with Colleen and I noticed there were, you know, some teachers who were not as consistent with the open circle time throughout the week. And you never know, like as I go in as an administrator and I'm thinking I'm being super supportive, it just feels like, is this evaluator? Where's this going? Why is this principal talking to me about this? You know, they know all of the demands I'm juggling. And so I would sit down with Colleen and say, you know, I'm really concerned that a few classrooms, it seems like they're not honoring their open circle time that the SEL curriculum implementation isn't exactly where it needs to be. And then she could go in and provide that support. So we would talk through it.

I would maybe as a school leader, send out a spreadsheet or reminder in the weekly, um, you know, staff emails, remember I need a copy of your schedule. I need to see where SEL lives twice a week, three times a week. You know, I would send maybe the accountability part of this, where I would say, okay, you know, you have to make sure that SEL happens on the day when our coaches in the building, in addition, because some people who, you know, were hesitant, maybe they just, this was not a strength of theirs. Initially they would like to not have it on the day when the coaches there. So then they weren't being observed. And so I would do kind of this accountability piece as the principal, keeping it at the forefront of our mission and connecting it to our goals. And then Colleen could come in during those times in that schedule and go in and actually support. And, and most of the time we found out that it

was just, you know, some jitters or a little bit of a lack of understanding and that coaching would get them over the hump.

**LUCAS HELD**

That's really helpful. So both of you were playing distinctive roles, one kind of goal setting and the other, uh, kind of supporting, uh, implementation, which, uh, Colleen mentioned isn't to be taken for granted.

**COLLEEN GALVIN  
LABBE**

I think one thing to add to that as well. Um, we really, in our roles did complement one another, as far as implementation goes. Um, I think something that also really supported, you know, part of our job or part of my job as a coach and also for Kimberley as a school leader is to facilitate the adult learning and collaboration, you know, across each, each team. And, um, the way that I think we were very successful in doing so was the entire year, um, the professional development for teachers the entire year was mapped out where it included SEL was a part of everything, whether it was about academics or culture and climate. Um, and the wonderful part was, you know, some of those I would facilitate for the school-wide staff, some would, you know, Kimberley would facilitate, but most of them we co-facilitated. So we were United as a team and saying, you know, we each play a different role here, but we are all on the same page working toward the same goals. And I think that was very powerful based on feedback.

**KIMBERLEY  
WILLIAMS**

Also. I agree. I was exactly thinking of that. Um, after the last example, um, you know, we would get teacher feedback on what they would need as a next step. Um, you know, Colleen would help to maneuver central office resources and additional research, and then together we would co-construct and co facilitate professional development that allowed teachers to really, um, map out what this would look like on the ground for students.

**LUCAS HELD**

Really interesting. So, uh, and I'm reminding, uh, reminded of a, uh, comment that RAND made in its study. And I'll quote, coaches have served as the glue between the system and the sites enhancing communication and providing coherence in several communities. And, uh, from, from your description, that glue comes from both having a kind of, um, uh, common language and practices and, um, making sure the whole school community, uh, and OST community is involved.

And Kimberley on, uh, on that point you had, uh, told a story earlier about a meeting of the parent council, uh, and maybe share that story because that may kind of extend the notion of glued, uh, further outward and the community.

**KIMBERLEY  
WILLIAMS**

Absolutely. Um, one of our key levers under the grant and one of our, um, SEL action plan items was to have common language, um, across the whole school. And so Colleen masterfully sat down with our specialty staff, right? Like they're not necessarily hosting circles, but they are with students weekly and supporting them in their SEL, uh, practices. And so she sat down with our specialty team and our out of school time partners and helped us to identify a common language within our open circle curriculum. Uh, we chose the words, cooperation, calm, breathing, positive self-talk and positive leader. And so in addition to the lessons that the curriculum had within the classroom and the open circle lessons, all of the staff across the building were using those terms.

So it'd be very typical to walk down the hallway. And as I saw students helping or being, you know, responsible and respectful of the learning of other classrooms, I would say, Oh my goodness, look at these positive leaders, great job, everyone being a positive leader. And that would have been a lesson from open circle that they had already had. It would be the same language that the afterschool director would use. And so, as, as you mentioned, it really blew me away when we got to our parent council meeting and we were giving our annual report on how SEL was working throughout the school and parents immediately, like they were so excited, they were like almost stopping the presentation. And when I shared the common language, they said, I just want you to know, like, this is working. My kids are coming home. And I mean, I had a parent who was in of a kindergartner. I had a parent of like a first and second grader. I mean, these are young children who, you know, we know that they're getting these skills and we see how it's promoting it in the class, but you never really know if it's transferring to other, um, other settings. Right. Is it something that they can use when they're on the playground and is it something that they can use when they leave?

And, uh, uh, you know, I could only hold back. My laughter, as a parent said, I'm driving in the car and you know, there's nothing but traffic and I, I, you know, here I am in the middle of road rage and my child from the backseat says, mommy, it's okay. Positive. Self-talk tell yourself, Okay. I'm like, you know, I mean, how does a win? That is when SEL is, you know, and then other parents gave us similar examples. They said, you

know, at night when, you know, we were doing things, they said, so we use the SEL standards and the SEL practices that BPS developed and have incorporated it into all of the SEL work we've been doing, um, with PSELI and through the grant, um, and through the Wallace foundation. And the parents says at night, we sit down, we read a book together and we do this. I said, mommy, you know, this is like our closing ritual, you know, at school we have a closing ritual. And really when we do this is, I mean, you, you know, talk about how this connects to literacy vocabulary language, right? How the SEL is supporting both their understanding of routines and rituals and how they're using it to really calm down. And self-regulate, I mean, there was no better, I feel like, you know, we, we certainly the surveys give tremendous information and the reporting gives tremendous information back to the staff. But that to me was when I knew this was working.

#### **LUCAS HELD**

That's a wonderful story that kind of bringing to life, uh, the idea of the kind of glue that a common vocabulary, if it's really understood and internalized, um, can provide to help people, uh, conceptualize understand and make sense of, of different, uh, many situations that, that might share a common theme of whether it's rage or frustration or what have you. Wonderful story. Um, I we'd be remiss if we didn't, uh, mentioned, uh COVID-19 and, and, and ask how, uh, the pandemic as, uh, affected, uh, uh, the work around social and emotional learning. And, uh, does it make it, uh, less relevant, more relevant, different, um, and, and maybe Kimberley let's start with you and go to Colleen.

#### **KIMBERLEY WILLIAMS**

SEL became even more important, right? It's one thing to self-regulate when you're going through what, you know, we could say as a normal day for a child and now to have schooling be happening remotely and virtually, uh, you know, for parents to be overwhelmed and stressed, having to work from home, become the, you know, almost teachers in the home and homeschooling as partners for us, especially with our youngest children who can't always independently get online and get to zooms and follow their schedules in a way that school provided a structure for normally. Um, so I have to say it was, you know, thankfully as an SEL school, we already had that as our focus, right.

Once again, my coach coming through there is Colleen sending supportive messages to the staff. She's providing me with the most current, um, applications of our SEL curriculum virtually, Hey, this has been updated for virtual use here. It is. I'm happy to come in and model



with the staff. I think one of the things that it added into, you know, in addition to everything we've already talked about, which we did adapt for remote, um, settings and for virtual settings, was it really shifted a goal for us, which was coming in the next year is just SEL for adults. Right? And so how do we support the staff?

So, you know, both the pandemic for COVID, but then the additional stress of, you know, racial turbulence in our country. And, you know, um, with the murder and death of George Floyd, we were opening up circles for adults around what this meant for them, you know, staff of color, white allies in our building, trying to, you know, process what they're seeing on TV. And then every day, you know, click on a zoom and support a student Colleen was right there. Again, hand in hand when we had our staff circles, she was there attending the circles with staff sharing very authentically, you know, her own processing, how she supporting and, and mainly I think for both of us just acknowledging that it was a lot, right, the same strategies and skills that we were supporting students with, take a calm breath, let's deep breathe.

This is a lot and, you know, really praising and, uh, you know, the accomplishments of our teacher, which, you know, just tremendously, you know, in a moment's notice, went virtual and really supported our students. So SEL, you know, certainly was a big help in getting us through it and getting us into the transition. And it was something that guided us in our support to families, to staff and to students.

**LUCAS HELD**

Thank you, Kimberley. So Colleen, how has the pandemic changed your approach to coaching?

**COLLEEN GALVIN  
LABBE**

So, um, I just want to say Kimberley, when you were, um, describing that I literally tears came to my eyes because it really was so moving, um, the work, you know, to be with staff now that you have built relationships with and to have, you know, this major shift and dual pandemics and making a really conscious effort to turn our support around adult SEL, um, was kind of, kind of amazing, um, at least for me as an educator and as a human. Um, the Boston Public Schools did an amazing job gathering resources and sharing us, sharing them with us in central office. My job was to sift through those and, you know, share those resources with Kimberley and staff. We created Google classrooms, um, a website also for, you know, parents to be able to

access all of our resources around SEL, um, and culturally responsive instruction. So, um, that was probably the first shift.

Um, over the summer, our team worked, um, a lot of extra hours to create, um, remote PD, so professional development for first of all the district. So the superintendent asked us to, um, offer professional learning sessions to all of the school leaders in Boston, as well as all of the educators, and that was mandatory and expected for the entire district. So, um, as Kimberley mentioned, the, uh, one of the, you know, the focus on SEL, um, we had a hashtag, it was hashtag Maslow before Bloom. So basically we were saying to leaders across the city, you know, we have to take a step back and look at what's really important here. And so that was kind of an amazing thing to be a part of as well. District-wide um, in Boston. And then it trickled down to schools and teachers.

What we've seen in the PSELI schools is like Kimberley was saying, we already had so many things in place. So many amazing structures were already in place in that knowledge base and the teachers. I mean, I could cry right now, what I've witnessed this year, just observing teachers, teach lessons in zoom and the impact they're having on students across our PSELI schools. I feel like I'm learning more than anybody this year. So I'm inspired every day by, by how the adults have taken, what they've learned and really shifted. You know, I don't want to say it's business as usual because it's not at all, but they're taking the strategies and the practices and the knowledge, and they're really just have shifted the implementation to remote and hybrid learning.

I would say I'm grateful to have these partnerships. Um, the school leaders are amazing. Um, Kimberley, as you know, has left the Kilmer to lead a transformation school. However, we are still in touch. I'm still sharing resources, resources, certainly we are friends, but she also calls if, you know, there's the consults needed. Um, so I think, um, that's been the most wonderful part of all is the seeing that are all that teaching and learning really can be applied across various settings and, you know, have success with it.

## **LUCAS HELD**

Well, thank you, Colleen. Um, and that's a great set up for, um, the last question we wanted to ask both of you, which is, um, what advice you would give other communities that, that might be considering, uh, whether to, uh, invest in coaching as an element of their SEL work. Uh,

and if so, who should it be available to? Uh, so let, let's start with you, uh, Colleen, and then go to Kimberley.

**COLLEEN GALVIN  
LABBE**

So I think everybody should have an SEL instructional coach to be able to work with. I really do feel strongly about that. Um, and you know, as you've seen, you've read the report, the RAND report, um, the data strongly supports, um, the impact on adult learning, which then in turn impacts, um, student learning. And that's why we're all here. So, um, and it doesn't mean, you know, you need to have a coach in your building one day a week, although that's ideal. Um, there are different models of coaching, you know, that we are also practicing to, um, be able to give access to consultation and resources, um, you know, to other cohorts of schools. So I do believe, you know, around the goals of implementing, aligning prep, you know, aligned practices for in and out of school to support students, um, conversations and private observation and feedback around integrating SEL across the school day and across academics, um, I think is very valuable.

**LUCAS HELD**

Thanks, Colleen. Uh, Kimberley, how about from your perspective, what, what advice would you give a district considering investing in coaching for SEL?

**KIMBERLEY  
WILLIAMS**

Yes. Um, you know, I agree with Colleen would say, when you consider coaching as a lever for SEL, you have to understand that you're going to get the outcomes and impact from that position and role. And so I think we're always balancing, like what's fiscally responsible and which programs get what I think. Um, you know, some of the reasons I've already stated when you have a coach, you have a person who helps keep the many competing demands that it helps to keep SEL at the center of the work that's happening. I think over time, you could release the amount of support that a coach gives, right? So it doesn't have to be a never-ending position, but it could be more time in the first year, you know, a different model. And we did the same things, um, at the Kilmer and in the work that I did with Colleen, um, absolutely having that be a support for the school leader.

You know, school leader, principal heads of school positions are often very isolated, right? They're in a different role and position. And so, you know, I've talked specifically about all of our SEL frameworks in the curriculum and the common language and the impact, but just having that emotional thought partner, you know, in the building, being

able to touch base and understanding what you're going through is so important and it helps to sustain you and keep you going. And especially when you're adding such a, you know, important initiative and something that takes a lot to get off the ground in the beginning, um, it's really critically important.

**LUCAS HELD**

Well, that's a, that's a terrific, uh, kind of summation, uh, uh, to this great conversation. Some of the themes that I heard were, um, the importance of coaching, um, successful implementation, uh, of an effective program, which is, uh, is really where the rubber meets the road. I think we've also heard about, um, different, slightly different roles that a coach may play, uh, for principal, uh, and for teachers, uh, who, uh, might be wary of having, uh, as you said, Colleen, one more thing, but might feel better. Uh, if it's connected to things that they're already doing. I think the stories that you've told, uh, uh, kind of bring, bring this idea to life of what a glue can look like in terms of a common language broadly understood, uh, across the school community, even to, uh, parents. Thank you again for joining us.

**KIMBERLEY WILLIAMS**

Thank you so much. This is wonderful. Thank you, Lucas. And just before we end the conversation, if I can give a huge shout out to all of the staff at the Kilmer, K8, the teachers who did this work on the ground and the SEL leadership team, they really are the ones that made this a success, family partnerships and students. And I just want to make sure that they hear that. Thank you. Amazing people.