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LESSONS FROM THE PARTNERSHIPS FOR SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INITIATIVE

VOLUME 1

EARLY LESSONS FROM Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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PREFACE

This is the executive summary of a report that offers early lessons from an initiative focused on social and emotional learning (SEL) in elementary schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs. The main report is available at www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1.

In 2016, in an effort to gain knowledge about how to help children develop SEL skills, The Wallace Foundation launched a six-year project called the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI). Wallace selected six communities—Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma—to explore whether and how children benefit when schools and OST programs partner to improve and align SEL, as well as what it takes to do this work. The findings and lessons outlined in the main report are based on these six communities' experiences implementing SEL for elementary school–aged students during the first two years of PSELI.

This 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 study was sponsored 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.

More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report should be directed to Heather Schwartz at heather_schwartz@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs across the United States are increasingly prioritizing and implementing practices to support children's social and emotional development. This report provides early implementation lessons from six communities about how to enact social and emotional learning (SEL) in elementary schools and in OST programs. These communities participate in a Wallace Foundation–funded initiative called the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (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.

In what we believe is the most-comprehensive SEL implementation study to date, we summarize the on-the-ground lessons learned in 38 partnerships between schools and OST programs across six communities that are attempting to embed SEL throughout the school and afterschool day. These partners are engaged in a wide variety of SEL activities. To extract lessons from these activities, we draw on a trove of data that includes approximately 5,000 completed surveys, 850 interviews, and observations of more than 3,000 instructional and noninstructional activities in schools and OST programs. Although these data cannot provide a complete picture of how schools and OST programs are implementing SEL programs and other PSELI components, our inclusion of multiple data-collection approaches and the wide variety of stakeholder perspectives enable us to provide an unusually wide-ranging description of what implementation looked like on the ground during PSELI's first two years and the factors that supported or hindered it.

What Is SEL and Why Is It Important?

There is no consensus definition of *social and emotional learning.* The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as "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" (CASEL, undated). The communities we describe in this report relied primarily on this widely used definition to guide their work.

SEL is important for brain development and for ensuring that children are ready to learn. Social and emotional competencies help promote youth readiness to succeed and thrive in their adult lives. SEL relies on adults who build trusting relationships with children and who directly foster those children's social and emotional development, which then enables them to benefit from academic instruction and from participation in other school and afterschool activities.

This report should be of interest to leaders of school districts and out-of-school time intermediary (OSTI) organizations who are thinking

of implementing SEL programs, as well as to leaders of individual schools and OST programs, policymakers, SEL technical assistance providers, funders, researchers, and others who are considering supporting youth social and emotional development. The field needs these experience-based lessons because the rapid expansion of SEL in schools and OST programs is outpacing the research on what it takes to do this work effectively. In this report, we provide the kind of much-needed implementation lessons that the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (2019) has called for. And by sharing examples of implementation in schools and OST programs, we incorporate the perspectives of those who are promoting youth development in programs that occur outside the traditional school setting.

In short, the six communities described in this report are at the cutting edge of an integrated approach to SEL throughout the school and OST program day. As a result, the lessons learned from their experiences are valuable to those who wish to implement SEL in or across schools, OST programs, or both, as well as to those who wish to form school-OST partnerships more generally.

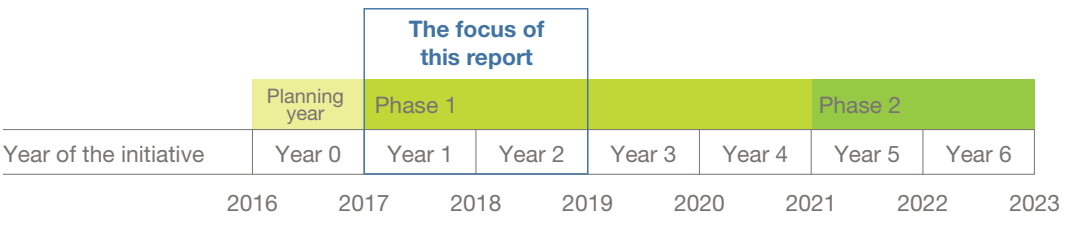
About the Initiative

As shown in Figure S.1, PSELI is divided into three stages (a planning year, Phase 1, and Phase 2), which we describe in more detail in this section.

Planning Year

The 2016–2017 school year, labeled Year 0, was a planning year in which The Wallace Foundation awarded grants to nine urban school districts and their OSTI partners to develop a plan to improve adult practices that support students' social and emotional skills. From these nine partnerships, six communities were

FIGURE S.1
The PSELI Timeline



selected to receive implementation grants that began in school year 2017–2018. Wallace chose the six communities because the school district and the OSTI (1) demonstrated a strong commitment to developing or had already developed a positive working relationship and (2) were committed to including SEL in their services to children but had not yet spread SEL throughout all of their elementary schools and OST program partners. The six communities that The Wallace Foundation selected are Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Phase 1

Phase 1 of PSELI began in the 2017–2018 school year and is a four-year period for the implementation of SEL in elementary schools and each school's co-located OST program(s) in a combined total of 38 school buildings, which we refer to as *sites* in this report.[1] At a majority of the Phase 1 sites, there is one OST program, such as a city Parks and Recreation program. In several of the six communities, though, there is more than one OST program at the site that is participating in PSELI. For example, a Playworks program, a YMCA program, and a small teacher-led arts program might all operate at a single school site and all participate in a school-OST partnership to jointly implement SEL. About one-fourth of students enrolled in Phase 1 elementary schools were also enrolled in one or more of the OST programs as of spring 2019.

During Phase 1, each of the six PSELI communities launched and developed a whole-campus approach to SEL in five to seven elementary schools and in their OST program partners. The goal at each Phase 1 site is to gradually make SEL a part of both the instruction that students receive and their interactions with adults throughout the school and OST parts of the day.

Although each PSELI community is designing and implementing its own approach, and each site within a community has some flexibility in what practices to adopt, all 38 sites in the first phase of PSELI are supposed to focus on the following four approaches to providing SEL for students:

[1] There are two exceptions in which the participating OST programs were near the school and in their own facilities.

1. Set a positive climate.[2]
2. Offer explicit SEL instruction to students during the school day (via written lesson plans from an evidence-based curriculum); SEL instruction during OST programs is 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.

Together, these four approaches to SEL align with the expansive view of "how learning happens" that is described in the final report of the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (2019). The fourth approach is what distinguishes PSELI from many other SEL efforts, and it is consistent with the Commission's recommendations to address learning both in and out of schools.

The Wallace Foundation funds the Phase 1 implementation work through annually awarded grants that started in summer 2017 and are split between the school district and the OSTI, which we refer to as the *system level* (as opposed to *site-level* activity at the 38 sites in Phase 1). The district and the OSTI use a portion of the grant for system-level staff and activities and distribute the balance among the five to seven Phase 1 sites in their community to fund SEL work at those locations.

Phase 2

Phase 2 of PSELI was designed to start in the 2021–2022 school year. The original plan was that, in Phase 2, a second set of 38 elementary schools and OST program partners would begin their SEL work, building on lessons learned from the Phase 1 sites.[3] Phase 2 sites were to conduct business as usual with no new SEL work until the 2021–2022 school year. However, in response to the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, The Wallace Foundation allowed the Phase 2 sites to start SEL work in 2020–2021 (which is the fourth and final year of Phase 1) if they wished to do so.

[2] 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 (Osher and Berg, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013).

[3] During the planning year, we worked with each district and OSTI to select Phase 1 and Phase 2 sites that were demographically and academically similar for the purpose of later comparing student and staff outcomes across the two categories of sites. A later report in this series will compare student and staff outcomes across Phase 1 and Phase 2 sites throughout the 2017–2018 to 2020–2021 period. We are using observations, surveys, and interviews to document the extent of both Phase 1 and Phase 2 sites' SEL activities during the four-year period.

Wallace also released half of the Phase 2 implementation grant funding earlier than planned (i.e., in the 2020–2021 year) to allow for Phase 2 SEL implementation if desired.

Summary of Initial Implementation Findings and Selected Early Lessons

As shown in Figure S.1, this report focuses on the first two years of PSELI implementation. As a result, the report documents implementation in the 38 sites that were actively working on SEL as of spring 2019. We drew on the hundreds of staff interviews and documents and the thousands of observations and staff surveys to identify the findings and lessons.

Because not every finding and lesson will be relevant to each reader, we organized them into the following four topics:

1. executing system-level activities to launch and coordinate SEL work across multiple sites
2. developing district-OSTI and school-OST partnerships
3. developing adults' capacity to promote SEL
4. improving climate and delivering SEL instruction to students.

Because this report focuses on only the halfway point of the first phase of PSELI, the lessons we draw are necessarily early ones that we expect to evolve and, in some instances, change. We expect that the findings and the pursuant lessons will change as the six communities' SEL work deepens. For example, we anticipate that future reports will include findings and lessons about work that is currently nascent, such as differentiation of SEL in school and OST settings or SEL data use.

Executing System-Level Activities to Launch and Coordinate SEL Work Across Multiple Sites

Findings

- **A clearer vision for SEL, paired with desired "look-fors" could have supported a stronger launch.** Defining SEL, creating shared terminology, and establishing what successful implementation would look like took longer than planned in all six PSELI communities. By the second year, communities had developed clearer guidance about which SEL skills to focus on and what practices sites should emphasize, and site leaders said this guidance was helpful.

- **Clear system-to-site communication required dedicated staff time.** The hire of a system-level SEL manager was instrumental to improved communication about the SEL work from the district and the OSTI to schools and OST programs. Principals' and OST managers' uneven consumption of written communication, such as emails, meant that the system-level staff needed to create a variety of mechanisms for successful communication, including phone calls, coaching visits, and in-person meetings.

- **Time constraints meant that this multi-part SEL project took more time to roll out than planned.** The number one barrier that each community mentioned was site and system staff having insufficient time available to execute plans. As a consequence, most communities did not execute all of their planned PSELI activities on the originally intended timeline.

- **Churn and unanticipated external events have been the norm, not the exception, requiring the communities to adapt their PSELI work to make it more resilient.** Unanticipated events, such as teacher walkouts, on top of recurring high rates of staff turnover slowed progress. Several communities have adapted by embedding SEL more permanently into their structures by, for example, housing SEL within the district's academics department or linking SEL to other priority areas, such as trauma-informed practices.

Selected Early Lessons

- Prior to launching a SEL initiative, define the targeted SEL skills, and then define success in terms of desired, observable

behaviors by instructors, students, or both. Work backward to then determine system-level supports needed for the end users.

- Create a manager role for the SEL effort that will be responsible for specifying what sites are supposed to implement, how, and when.
- In anticipation of staff turnover, create onboarding materials about the SEL effort.

Developing District-OSTI and School-OST Partnerships

Findings

- **Being committed to SEL and taking the time to meet were important starting points for district-OSTI partnerships.** Schools and OST programs can function in parallel worlds with few points of connection. Although they bring complementary expertise, they also have large organizational differences and therefore need to develop shared norms, language, and trust. Institutionally, both the OSTI and the district in each community had made important commitments to SEL prior to the start of PSELI and once it began, which aided those partnerships. Although finding time could be challenging because of busy schedules, the system-level leaders whom we interviewed said that it was important to make the time to meet in person in at least the beginning stages of the initiative to build relationships and trust across the organizations.
- **School-OST partnerships benefited from new structures to support collaboration and some new staff roles that bridged both settings.** School-OST partnerships typically started with the principal and OST manager meeting regularly and then evolved into collaboration mechanisms, such as a SEL committee. But the PSELI sites also increasingly adopted staffing roles that bridged the school and OST day. Examples of these roles include an OST SEL coordinator and crossover positions that enable school teachers to work for the OST program and OST staff to work for the school.
- **Staff turnover posed serious challenges for district-OSTI and school-OST partnerships.** Recurring staff turnover has been the norm, especially in school district positions

and among OST instructors. This turnover can stall the school-OST partnership formation. In response to OST staff turnover, one community developed onboarding materials to codify the OST partners' role in building strong connections with the school.

- **There was a perceived and actual power differential between schools and OST programs.** The difference in power tipped in favor of schools, and some OST and OSTI staff expressed that they were perceived as "babysitters" or as having less say in PSELI decisions. There has been some improvement over time, especially among the proportion of school staff who felt respected by OST staff. Ways that schools and OST programs have reduced the power imbalance include improving space-sharing for OST program functions, hiring full-time on-site OST managers or coordinators who can attend school meetings, and establishing SEL steering committees with representation from both school and OST staff.

- **Joint professional development (PD) for school and OST staff was difficult to execute.** Because of opposing work schedules in which the school teachers' days end as after-school instructors' days begin, it was hard to find mutually acceptable times when both staff could attend joint training. It was also challenging to find content that was equally applicable to both sets of staff. Instead of relying on joint PD sessions, school and OST staff suggested adapting the content of that PD to make it applicable to staff in both settings and delivering PD separately. In this way, PD can foster a shared understanding of the work without requiring members of each group to participate at the same time.

- **SEL rituals were a good starting point for OST and school staff to create continuity, which was deepened by use of consistent SEL curricula.** The use of SEL curricula, which we refer to as *content sequences* in OST settings, can be a tall order for OST programs, given that such materials are not readily available on the market. Using consistent SEL curricula also requires considerable coordination to jointly plan pacing schedules so that children receive instruction on complementary SEL topics in both settings each week. Short of consistent curricula, the joint use of SEL rituals or other brief SEL activities is a less demanding form of SEL coordination that may prove more practical, particularly for OST programs

led by volunteers or those that are too brief to deliver full units of study from a SEL content sequence.

Selected Early Lessons

- Despite the challenges of limited time, consider the benefits of face-to-face meetings, especially in the first year of a SEL partnership, to develop trust and understanding of each other's organizations.
- Make space-sharing modifications as needed so that OST instructors can reasonably deliver SEL instruction to groups of students in a quiet space.
- Document and formalize SEL processes and routines so that these may live on even if specific individuals leave. Examples of formalized processes may include a short list of desired, observable behaviors and conditions, as well as a list of "do-now" activities for school and OST staff with guidance about when and how to use them.

Developing Adults' Capacity to Promote SEL

Findings

- **PSELI communities viewed adult SEL skills as a foundation for building student SEL skills.** Many interviewees viewed the development of adults' abilities to establish and maintain their own healthy relationships as the fundamental precursor to those adults effectively teaching their students how to do the same. The communities approached adult skill-building differently; some sites offered system-designed training and others developed their own approach.
- **Staff wanted SEL PD to include hands-on practice and, as their SEL work progressed, to focus on differentiation of SEL instruction.** Staff survey results indicated that differentiation was the topic for which the largest percentage of school and OST staff needed additional PD. Specifically, staff reported a need for PD to help them adapt SEL to meet the needs of students with disabilities or with cultural or linguistic differences.
- **Staff turnover posed a persistent challenge for PD delivery.** One way that PSELI communities tackled the staff turnover

challenge was by offering some, but not all, PD in smaller chunks on a frequent basis. The communities also created calendars of scheduled PD for the entire second year of PSELI, indicating which PD activities were mandatory and what the purpose of each was, and distributed the calendars in advance so that sites could plan their schedules.

- **Although support for SEL was high among school and OST staff, they also expressed concerns.** One-third of school teachers in PSELI and one-half of OST instructors agreed or strongly agreed that adults other than themselves (such as counselors, psychologists, or parents) should take primary responsibility for their students' SEL needs. PSELI system and site leaders also described what they termed *misperceptions* about SEL—for example, SEL is necessary only for students with behavioral challenges; SEL is appropriate for young children but not adults; and integrating SEL would mean that students would not incur any consequences for misbehavior.

- **Several PSELI communities have learned to centralize the delivery of at least some SEL PD for frontline staff, especially the PD about the SEL curriculum.** Although most communities have taken a train-the-trainer approach—whereby someone from the central office at the system level trains one or two people (such as a SEL champion) from each site who, in turn, relays training to site-based staff—many communities have recentralized the role of SEL curriculum training in particular after finding substantial inconsistencies among sites and undue burdens on site-level trainers.

- **SEL coaches have served a critical function in helping schools and OST programs deliver SEL instruction.** Coaching provides a way to customize PD to teachers' or instructors' needs and helps ensure that it is relevant to their day-to-day work. Coaches also played a key role in fostering communication between school and OST staff and explaining how to deliver SEL instruction. However, in some PSELI communities, staff expressed confusion about the coaches' roles and responsibilities.

Selected Early Lessons

- In recognition of staff turnover, include in a recurring SEL PD schedule both longer sessions about SEL instruction

and more-frequent but shorter sessions on more-discrete SEL topics.

- Do not rely exclusively on a train-the-trainer model in which the responsibility for all SEL training falls solely on site leaders—especially for training about SEL curricula (or content sequences) and pedagogy; content expertise is critical for those topics.
- When using a SEL coach, develop a written document for coaches and site-level leaders that codifies the coaches' responsibilities, including minimum coaching requirements and number of visits, and discuss this document with each involved party.

Improving Climate and Delivering SEL Instruction to Students

Findings

- **SEL rituals and routines were a good starting point for promoting a positive climate.** The six communities adopted SEL rituals and routines in schools and OST programs, drawing primarily on CASEL's three signature practices: welcoming inclusion activities, such as greeting each student by name; engaging strategies, such as students working together; and optimistic closures to reflect on the day's activities. Some staff we interviewed reported that these rituals and routines had a positive effect on school and OST program climate.
- **Time for stand-alone SEL lessons was often cut short.** Across communities, most of the 38 schools had planned to offer at least 30 minutes of explicit SEL instruction each week during the 2018–2019 school year. And in three of the six communities, system leaders planned for OST programs to offer explicit SEL lessons, with frequency ranging from daily to weekly. But teachers and OST instructors were not always able to offer the full lessons because of interruptions or unexpected demands on school or program schedules.
- **Most of the schools adapted the SEL curriculum used.** According to interviews, common reasons for adapting a curriculum were to shorten the lessons or to adapt portions of the curriculum to meet the needs of specific groups of students,

such as English learners or students with disabilities. Staff in all six communities expressed a need for curriculum materials that would be appropriate to a diverse student body.

- **SEL content sequences for OST programs were in an early stage of development.** OST programs had substantially fewer published SEL materials to choose from than schools did. The OSTIs took several approaches to address this gap: (1) working with sites to pilot new OST materials from developers that had existing, established school-based curricula; (2) writing their own content; and (3) using existing school-based curricula. In our spring 2019 observations, we found that the highest frequency of SEL instruction in OST programs occurred in a community that had piloted OST lessons created by the developer of the SEL curriculum that schools were using.

- **Guidance about how to integrate SEL into academics and regular classes lagged behind guidance about how to deliver stand-alone SEL lessons.** PSELI communities had not provided formal guidance to instructors about how to integrate SEL into academics and activities by the end of the second year of PSELI participation. Yet most site-level interviewees described their own efforts to do this, primarily through pedagogical practices that they viewed as consistent with high-quality instruction. Although the interviewees typically did not attribute these efforts to PSELI or describe them as SEL, our interviews, observations, and survey data suggest that such practices were common.

Selected Early Lessons

- Create clear guidance documents that define SEL rituals and routines and provide explicit direction regarding how, when, and with what frequency to implement SEL practices.

- Include protected time for SEL in the master schedule, making a realistic allocation that reflects necessary transition times and arrivals, as well as student energy levels during the day.

- Provide explicit guidance to staff on how to integrate SEL instruction into school-day academics and OST activities, including specific pedagogical strategies and lesson content (such as how to collaborate effectively) that instructors can easily implement across subject areas and types of activities.

SEL standards in schools and OST programs' continuous quality improvement processes can help frame this guidance.

Implications for SEL Practice and Policy

The ambitious and complex work that the six PSELI communities carried out over the first two years of the initiative provided numerous lessons for the broader field, many of which are especially relevant to staff in specific roles. In Table S.1, we pull together the overarching implications, organized by role.

At the time this report was written, the schools and OST programs we examine were still in the first half of their SEL work. Much was left to learn, including whether PSELI implementation activities would improve student SEL skills, academic achievement, climate, or adults' outcomes (such as staff retention and job commitment). Those topics are the focus of a later report in this series that will examine outcomes and the relationship between implementation and outcomes. The series will also include a how-to guide. Additionally, we are conducting in-depth case studies that will offer a more detailed picture of what PSELI work looks like on the ground and how it evolves over time. These future reports will revisit and build on the early lessons outlined here.

TABLE S.1
Implications for Staff in Key Roles

Role	Implications
School district and OSTI leaders	• A specific vision for SEL, combined with frequent, clear communication with sites, can promote strong site-level implementation. • Clear and specific guidance from the system level to sites about desired practices can also facilitate strong implementation. • When planning a SEL effort, leaders should anticipate that lack of time, staff turnover, and unexpected events might slow implementation. • Staff can benefit from PD that is ongoing, customized, and provided by coaches with prior expertise in the relevant setting (school or OST program). • OSTIs can help OST programs adopt and innovate SEL practices.
School and OST program leaders and staff	• Site leaders need to be intentional about protecting time for SEL and conveying to staff the priority of delivering the intended SEL instruction. • When adapting an evidence-based SEL curriculum to meet local needs, retain features that contribute to the curriculum's effectiveness. • The integration of SEL instruction into academics and OST activities requires explicit guidance and resources, such as lesson plans and model activities. • SEL coaches can provide valuable support to school and OST staff who are implementing new SEL programs and practices. • Taking the time to meet, increasing the overlap of school and OST staff, and explicitly acknowledging the power differential that favors schools over OST programs are important ingredients for strong school-OST partnerships.
Policymakers, curriculum developers, technical assistance providers, funders, and state education agencies	• Because it can take several years to implement SEL efforts effectively, funders and policymakers should offer encouragement and incentives for educators to persevere and to craft realistic implementation plans. • High-quality, varied communication strategies can support site-level implementation, but system-level leaders might lack the capacity to develop these strategies on their own. • Because available SEL curriculum materials might not fully meet communities' needs for culturally relevant SEL or for teaching students with Individualized Education Plans, practitioners could benefit from collaborations with curriculum experts and developers to make these adaptations. • Funding and other resources to institutionalize new roles, such as SEL coaches, could promote sustainability of SEL efforts.

ABBREVIATIONS

CASEL	Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
OST	out-of-school time
OSTI	out-of-school time intermediary
PD	professional development
PSELI	Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative
SEL	social and emotional learning

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In 2016, in an effort to gain knowledge about how to help children develop social and emotional learning (SEL) skills, The Wallace Foundation launched a six-year project called the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI). The goals of PSELI are for students to experience reinforcing messages about SEL both in school and in out-of-school time (OST) programs; practice social and emotional skills in both settings; and experience consistent, supportive relationships between adults and students. To achieve these goals, school districts and out-of-school time intermediaries have partnered to develop professional development about SEL for school and OST staff; help elementary schools and their OST partners develop closer working relationships; and implement reinforcing SEL practices and instruction across both settings. In what the authors believe is the most-comprehensive SEL implementation study to date, they draw lessons than can help school districts and OST providers carry out their own SEL programs.

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