



LESSONS FROM THE PARTNERSHIPS FOR
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INITIATIVE

VOLUME 2, PART 1

Strengthening Students' Social and Emotional Skills

Lessons from Six Case Studies of
Schools and Their Out-of-School-Time
Program Partners

KATIE TOSH, HEATHER L. SCHWARTZ, CATHERINE H. AUGUSTINE



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Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

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

ISBN: 978-1-9774-0987-4

Cover: Photo provided by Cowell Elementary School.

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As the second graders get ready for reading time at the Russell Elementary School in Boston, the teacher strikes a chime to guide them through a mindful breathing exercise to calm their bodies during the transition and discusses how the brain's prefrontal cortex helps with self-control. Once students are seated on the rug, the teacher reads a book to the class, pausing throughout to ask them to name the emotions of characters and how they would feel if they were the character in different situations in the book. The lesson ends with students each sharing a memory that made them feel happy.

This is an example of instruction that schools and out-of-school-time (OST) programs¹ are increasingly offering to help students recognize and manage their emotions and build positive, trusting relationships among staff and students. They are doing so because prior research shows social and emotional learning (SEL) contributes to better learning and life outcomes for students.²

Recognizing the potential for both schools and OST programs to promote children and youth's social and emotional development, The Wallace Foundation launched the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI) in 2017. This initiative brings together school districts and out-of-school-time intermediary (OSTI)³ organizations in six communities to develop and implement intensive, mutually

Key Findings

- Looking across six multi-year case studies, we identified eight themes that facilitated the elementary schools' and out-of-school-time programs' successful implementation of SEL programming. Each theme held for at least two of the six case studies.
- The first theme highlights the importance of school and OST program leaders who are committed to SEL. The rest of the themes identify strategies for successful SEL implementation.
- The strategies we identified include those that can contribute to a productive school-OST program partnership. Whether partnering or not, we also identify strategies for schools or OST programs to sequence campus-wide SEL implementation by starting with building adults' and then children's SEL skills. The final theme points toward sustaining SEL work even as staff turn over by distributing leadership.

reinforcing SEL activities and instruction in schools and OST programs.

Through PSELI, The Wallace Foundation seeks to provide lessons for the field on whether and how children will benefit if adults in schools and OST programs collaborate to improve climate⁴ and to foster SEL, as well as what it takes to do this work.

Starting in summer 2017, The Wallace Foundation awarded implementation grants to each of the following six communities: Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. The districts and OSTIs, which jointly received these grants, then allocated some of these funds to an initial cohort of schools and OST programs, ranging from five to seven partnerships in each community. Altogether, 38 elementary school–OST program partnerships worked in this initial cohort to jointly implement SEL during the four school years from 2017–2018 to 2020–2021.

The RAND Corporation serves as the research partner on PSELI and is responsible for gathering implementation and outcomes data from all 38 school–OST program partnerships, as well as another 38 comparison sites from the same communities. RAND is publishing several reports about the implementation and outcomes of PSELI, all of which can be found at www.rand.org/pseli. The first report, *Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning* (available at www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1), documents early implementation lessons across the 38 school–OST program partnerships. The six case studies summarized here follow that report.

To develop the case studies, RAND researchers worked with district and OSTI leaders to identify one school–OST program partnership from each of the six PSELI communities, looking for sites with successful, unique, or interesting approaches to SEL. We ultimately selected six sites for their exemplary work addressing what we have found to be widely shared challenges to SEL implementation:

- developing a brand-new school–OST partnership focusing on SEL (Boston)
- developing an effective SEL committee that includes a school and an OST partner (Dallas)

- finding and protecting time for SEL in the school and OST schedules (Denver)
- including more adults than just teachers and OST instructors in SEL (Palm Beach)
- incorporating equity into SEL (Tacoma)
- focusing on adult SEL first (Tulsa).

The purpose of the case studies is to show in detail what the partners' SEL work looked like in practice and to identify the levers that facilitated the work. To capture this detail, we collected an unusually comprehensive amount of information over four years, including annual surveys of school and OST program staff; full-day observations in several years; annual interviews of school district, OSTI, school, and OST program leaders and, in some years, instructors; and documents about SEL implementation. For details on data collection, please refer to the appendix. In a future report, we will examine implementation and student outcomes across all 38 school–OST program partnerships across six communities.

Below, we provide a short summary of each of the six case studies and link to each of the respective reports. We then describe eight themes—each of which was common to at least two of the six cases— to elevate practices and policies that may be generally promising. Seven of the eight themes are strategies that schools and/or OST programs could enact that we believe characterize successful SEL implementation, and the eighth is the condition of leaders committed to SEL. In the appendix, we summarize PSELI along with the data and methods we used for the six case studies.

The main intended audiences for this report are school principals, OST program directors, school district leaders, OSTI leaders, and educators who specialize in SEL. We also hope that the report is useful for SEL researchers, technical assistance providers, and funders.

WHAT IS SEL?

There is no consensus definition of *social and emotional learning*. The one that most of the communities⁵ we describe in this report used comes from the Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL): “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.”⁶ In practice, the six cases we examined—and most of the 38 school–OST program partnerships overall—focused mainly on understanding and managing emotions and establishing and maintaining positive relationships.

WHY FOCUS ON SEL?

Research shows a positive association between students’ social and emotional skills and academic achievement,⁷ and also with long-term outcomes such as employment, earnings, and health and well-being.⁸ Programs that include explicit SEL instruction can build students’ SEL competencies and improve student behavior and academic outcomes.⁹ SEL can promote equity by equipping students and adults with the skills of social awareness, empathy, and critical thinking to evaluate and address systemic injustices.¹⁰

While there are different ways to provide opportunities for students to learn social-emotional skills, research identifies several common principles among effective approaches. The first principle is that, for adults to foster children’s social and emotional development, they need to create a positive, supportive climate in which students can engage in learning, which is, in turn, associated with the development of academic and social skills.¹¹ The second principle is the importance of taking a consistent approach across the setting in which SEL programming is being implemented, whether in a school, an OST program, or both.¹²

To take a consistent approach across a campus or program, schools or OST programs can adopt a formal SEL curriculum that provides written stand-alone lessons, along with lesson plans and pacing guides that outline the sequence of instruction for SEL

topics. Schools and OST programs can also integrate SEL into regular academic instruction or OST activities, either through providing students with direct opportunities to practice specific social-emotional skills (e.g., teamwork during a science lesson) or through making explicit connections to social-emotional skills during instruction (e.g., discussing a character's emotions during an English language arts lesson). Finally, schools and OST programs can adopt short SEL rituals that target the development of social-emotional skills and can be easily embedded into the day. For example, warm welcomes like greeting each student by name as they enter the building or classroom create a sense of predictability and belonging for students while building relationship skills.

These practices contribute to a positive climate, as they improve relationships among students and between students and adults. As the field of SEL has evolved, school and OST leaders have also learned to focus on adults' SEL competencies as well as on those of students. And educators continue to develop more culturally responsive SEL practices, which prioritizes students' cultural identities and lived experiences. Creating a shared set of practices, values, and language for SEL within a school or OST program (or both) provides a consistent set of learning opportunities for students.

AN OVERVIEW OF EACH CASE STUDY

Boston: Expanding SEL Beyond the School Walls

Forming a school and OST program partnership—especially one that involves mutually reinforcing instruction—can take more effort than initially assumed, as many PSELI partnerships learned. This case study speaks to this endeavor. The Russell Elementary School lacks a gym, cafeteria, or other space that could be used for enrichment activities. Meanwhile, a half-mile down the road sit the fully equipped facilities of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Dorchester (BGCD). The incoming principal at the Russell decided to create a partnership with the BGCD to bus all its students twice a week during the school day to the BGCD for SEL-infused enrichment activities. The school and BGCD learned how to build a new partnership, strategies to make SEL mutually reinforcing across settings, and methods to ensure staff buy-in to SEL. Read more about their approach to SEL here: www.rand.org/t/RRA379-5.

Dallas: Building an Effective SEL Committee

The partnership between Webster Elementary and the co-located Thriving Minds After School (TMAS) program was a long-standing one, to which they added an intensive focus on SEL. They, like almost all 38 school and OST program partners in PSELI, formed a SEL committee to shepherd their work. But Webster and TMAS developed an exceptionally active and effective SEL committee, composed of school staff and the TMAS manager, who possessed complementary data analysis skills, logistics experience, and SEL content knowledge. The committee's effectiveness grew as it adopted more-routinized recurring weekly meetings and a system for documenting SEL policies, shared terms, data, and guidance. The committee decided on a campus-wide approach to SEL that favored daily use of short SEL rituals and a house system to make students feel more connected to school. The work at this site was associated with improvements in campus climate. Read more about their approach to SEL here: www.rand.org/t/RRA379-6.

Denver: Jointly Prioritizing Time for SEL in a Strong School and OST Program Partnership

School and OST program staff we interviewed across PSELI communities consistently identified a lack of time as the number one barrier to executing their SEL plans.¹³ Cowell Elementary and its afterschool program partner, Discovery Link, tackled this challenge as they each found time for SEL and jointly made SEL skills, such as responsible decisionmaking and empathy, a part of their daily routines and instruction during the school and afterschool day. They dedicated time for SEL during each of their respective schedules, meetings, assemblies, and family nights and adopted a shared SEL curriculum and rituals. The time allocated for SEL was associated with an increase in the amount of explicit SEL instruction that occurred in both the school and OST program. Read more about their approach to SEL here: www.rand.org/t/RRA379-7.

Palm Beach County: Including Teachers, Staff, and Parents in the Use of SEL Practices

Many PSELI schools initially planned to include parents, non-instructional staff, and instructional staff in their SEL work, but this proved to be more challenging than they initially appreciated. The Diamond View Elementary School and Diamond View Afterschool partnership stands out for its focus on promoting positive adult-student interactions across three settings: school, OST program, and home. The school and OST program leaders started with strengthening the school-OST partnership to promote consistency in instructors' interactions with students across the full day. They then expanded their efforts to train noninstructional staff in key SEL components and provide families with ideas for extending SEL in home settings to improve students' experiences outside of the classroom. They also increased opportunities for student input into SEL activities. We observed steady improvement in climate over three years as they worked on positive adult-student interactions. Read more about their approach to SEL here: www.rand.org/t/RRA379-8.

Tacoma: Prioritizing Racial Equity Within SEL

PSELI involves school–OST program partnerships to jointly implement SEL, but the partnerships ranged from new to mature and from slightly to highly coordinated. In Tacoma, the PSELI OST program partners only started operation in the second year of the initiative, and the school–OST program partnerships then took time to form. Therefore, we focused the Tacoma case study on one school’s efforts—Lister Elementary—to incorporate racial equity within SEL rather than that school’s partnership with its OST programs. Though many other school–OST program partnerships across PSELI were at earlier stages of integrating racial equity into SEL, we include the Tacoma case because it highlights a more mature-stage example of what prioritizing racial equity in SEL can look like on the ground. In the school’s multi-year process of integrating a focus on racial equity into SEL, the school leaders worked intensively on gaining staff buy-in for the importance of prioritizing SEL and equity and developed and refined a set of SEL lessons that incorporated content about racial equity and restorative practices.¹⁴ Lister consistently stood out as an exemplar in our survey and observation data, particularly when it came to SEL and restorative practice implementation, perceived cultural appropriateness of its SEL curriculum, and staff commitment. Read more about its approach to SEL here: www.rand.org/t/RRA379-9.

Tulsa: Learning to Focus on Adult SEL First

SEL leaders in PSELI grew to recognize the importance of building adults’ own social and emotional skills as a step toward building students’ skills. The case study involving Whitman Elementary and its OST partner, Youth at Heart, illustrates this lesson, showing how they had initially asked adults to teach SEL to children, only to realize they needed to invest more heavily in adult SEL skill-building. By focusing on adult SEL, Whitman and Youth at Heart aimed to help educators prioritize their own mental health to reduce burnout, effectively model SEL competencies for students, and build strong and healthy relationships with students. After doing so, school and OST program staff both reported improvements in students’ social and emotional skills, students’ behavior, and school climate, which they attributed to their work on adult SEL. Read more about their approach to SEL here: www.rand.org/t/RRA379-10.

SHARED THEMES CONNECTED TO EFFECTIVE SEL IMPLEMENTATION

Even though the six school and afterschool programs' approaches differed, many of the factors that facilitated their SEL work were the same. Of the eight shared themes we identified, the first is a condition (having a leader who demonstrates commitment to SEL through actions), while the rest are strategies (e.g., creating an effective SEL committee). Each of these themes required ongoing, committed work. While these themes are not strictly sequential, they tended to occur in the order in which we present them below. We describe each in detail in the sections that follow.

1. Committed school and OST program leaders took concrete actions that laid the foundation for SEL.
2. Establishing trusting relationships was a necessary first step to building an effective school-OST program partnership.
3. SEL committees guided and supported implementation.
4. Starting with adults' own SEL skills proved central, followed by professional development about developing students' skills.
5. Short SEL rituals were often the first and most widely adopted strategy, setting the stage for formal instruction.
6. Prioritizing time for SEL in schedules was important to making implementation routine.
7. Formal SEL resources facilitated a consistent approach within and across settings.
8. Distributing "ownership" of SEL across staff and students increased buy-in and sustainability.

Many of these findings echo those we identified in our report *Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning* (www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1), based on our data about the first two years of implementation from all 38 pilot sites in PSEL. For example, we had advised schools and OST programs seeking to implement SEL approaches to protect time for SEL and convey that providing SEL instruction was a priority. These case studies reinforce the

relevance of those earlier messages and provide details on how schools and OST programs enacted these strategies.

THEME 1

COMMITTED SCHOOL AND OST PROGRAM LEADERS TOOK CONCRETE ACTIONS THAT LAID THE FOUNDATION FOR SEL

At all six school and OST programs we feature, the principals and OST program managers (i.e., staff responsible for coordinating the OST program's daily operations and organizing programming and activities for students) played a critical role in launching SEL activities. This held true whether leaders were new or long-standing at the school or OST program. The school principals in the Boston and Tacoma cases were recent hires working to turn around school climate and academic performance; they saw SEL as an integral part of their approach. In Dallas, Denver, and Palm Beach County, either the school, OST program, or both had long-standing leaders, and these leaders leveraged their existing relationships and knowledge to launch a shared initiative. In Tulsa, committed leadership from the principal and assistant principal helped the partnership weather high teacher turnover and high turnover in the OST manager position.

Principals and OST managers not only set the vision, but they also made SEL a priority through a variety of concrete actions. They participated in or authorized SEL committees responsible for managing the SEL work (the facilitator we discuss next). They changed the schedules to devote time to SEL. They helped decide what SEL curriculum and practices to adopt, established SEL trainings for staff, and, in some cases, designated staff to have paid time to focus on SEL. The school principals and OST managers were also the ones primarily responsible for ensuring that the approach to SEL stayed coordinated and consistent across the school and OST settings. Although these responsibilities could be delegated to counselors, assistant program directors, or other roles (as seen in the discussion of many of the facilitators below),

effective SEL execution in the case study school and OST programs often started with the leaders signaling its importance and launching specific SEL approaches.

THEME 2

ESTABLISHING TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WAS A NECESSARY FIRST STEP TO BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL–OST PROGRAM PARTNERSHIP

For five of the six sites highlighted in the case studies, partnerships between the elementary school and OST program were a central aspect of their SEL work. (In the sixth, the partnership was nascent and did not yet involve coordinated implementation of SEL.) The five sites found that partnering needed ongoing attention and that purposefully building relationships and trust among staff improved their collaboration on SEL. The relationship-building was a necessary precursor to the subsequent creation of mutually reinforcing SEL activities, such as the shared rituals, lesson plans, and distributed ownership that we describe below. There were several ways in which the schools and OST program leaders intentionally structured opportunities for relationship-building that were a precursor to subsequent stages of work to create mutually reinforcing SEL activities across the in-school day and the afterschool day.

- Creating opportunities for face-to-face interaction of school and OST program instructors helped build trust and familiarity across the two settings. These opportunities included joint SEL committees (which we profile in the Dallas case study), joint professional development about SEL (which both school and OST staff were paid to attend), and observation of each others' SEL activities. Joint training tended to occur during pre-service days at the beginning of a school year. In

Palm Beach County, one school and OST partner went a step further and also paid for OST program staff to attend school grade-level meetings throughout the school year. Giving teachers and OST instructors an opportunity to observe each other's classes was an important way not only to build trust but also to mutually reinforce SEL instruction across the two settings. The case study sites in Boston and Palm Beach County structured staff schedules in a way that made these observations possible.

- Using short SEL rituals like “warm welcomes” in SEL committee meetings that included school and OST program staff increased camaraderie and modeled the practices that they hoped instructors would use.
- Facilitating asynchronous relationship-building between school and OST program staff can help mitigate their lack of overlapping availability and limited opportunities to interact. One way the school and OST partner in the Palm Beach County case did this was by creating a “getting to know you” bulletin board, which included “about me” sheets for a variety of school and OST program staff.
- Devoting space in the school building for the OST program nurtured interactions at the Denver case study site. The school provided the OST program a dedicated classroom for activities, which also served as the shared office of the OST program director and the school SEL lead during school hours. Although not all schools have extra space, this led to improved and more-frequent communication about SEL between school staff and OST program instructors at the Denver site.
- Making cross-staff hires promoted a shared understanding of classroom expectations and routines and built relationships between teachers and OST program instructors. The school and OST partner in the Denver case achieved this by hiring OST program staff as paraprofessionals in the school. In the Tulsa case study site, many of the OST program staff were also teachers at the school.

THEME 3

SEL COMMITTEES GUIDED AND SUPPORTED IMPLEMENTATION

Each of the six schools and OST programs that we studied formed committees to lead and oversee SEL implementation. To foster high-quality SEL implementation, the committees met at least monthly and were responsible for overseeing or supporting the day-to-day SEL implementation, such as the training of staff. Led by the school and OST program leaders, the committees set goals, monitored progress toward those goals, provided feedback on how implementation could improve, and developed resources such as professional development or lessons. For example, the SEL committee at the Tacoma case study site helped create a sequence of SEL lessons using multiple resources, including the curriculum that the district had selected, and then trained school staff in how to implement those SEL resources.

The typical SEL committee included representatives from both the school and OST program. Indeed, the committee was often the avenue through which the school and OST program coordinated and kept each other informed of their SEL work. These teams usually had only one OST representative, usually the OST manager, who was not primarily responsible for providing direct instruction to students and therefore had a more flexible schedule. The school tended to have two to four representatives, including the school principal and/or assistant principal, a school mental health provider, and a teacher or counselor who held a special assignment to be a SEL lead. Some SEL committees also involved additional teachers, paraprofessionals, or afterschool program staff, though scheduling constraints made participation of these additional people intermittent. The job titles mattered less than having individuals who were empowered to make decisions and, as the Dallas case study makes clear, had the right mix of skill sets (e.g., facility with data, understanding of logistics, SEL knowledge, ability to connect people) to maximize the effectiveness of the team. With empowered, complementary members, the committees were the driving force behind the remaining strategies that we describe below.

THEME 4

STARTING WITH ADULTS' OWN SEL SKILLS PROVED CENTRAL, FOLLOWED BY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON DEVELOPING STUDENTS' SEL SKILLS

Although the schools' and OST programs' ultimate goal was to improve students' social and emotional skills, many discovered that it was equally important to build adults' social and emotional skills—in some cases before adults could focus on student SEL. This lesson was clearest in the Tulsa case study, in which the school and OST program each experienced high teacher turnover, high teacher burnout, and staff feeling unequipped to support students facing trauma. Without first building the instructors' own SEL skills, they were inconsistent in their use of the several newly introduced SEL activities for students. School and OST leadership changed their approach to help staff prioritize their own mental health, build strong relationships among staff and between staff and students, and model the social and emotional skills they hoped to cultivate in students. This focus on adult SEL led to increased use of SEL instructional materials and improved staff outcomes, including reduced staff burnout prior to the pandemic.

In addition to building adults' own social and emotional competencies, these same adults also needed training to learn their site's approach to building students' social and emotional competencies. Although the case study school and OST programs we feature went about this in the following different ways, they typically landed on a longer, anchor training during a pre-service day followed by frequent, short “bites” about discrete SEL concepts or activities delivered throughout the school year. In Denver, for example, the OST program used grant funds to pay for OST staff to attend summer and winter break trainings with teachers and several 30-minute social, emotional, and academic learning (SEAL) trainings during the school year. In Dallas, the school and OST program provided a series of trainings with different durations: One year, they held a weeklong bootcamp on expectations

for SEL and shared SEL terminology and then during the school year built 20 minutes of SEL training into schoolwide teacher meetings each Monday. The principal, counselor, and SEL specialist also provided on-the-spot coaching to guide staff as they adopted SEL practices. In Tacoma, the school offered teachers a menu of professional development support.

In Palm Beach County, the school and OST program took a slightly different approach based on their recognition that relationships between adults and students were central to SEL, and their professional development worked to achieve consistency in how each adult approached SEL with students. The professional development began with a focus on school and OST program staff, expanded to include role-specific SEL professional development for noninstructional staff (paraprofessionals, cafeteria staff, office staff, the school’s bus drivers, and the school resource officer), and then expanded again during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic to inform families about strategies to support SEL for students at home.

THEME 5

SHORT SEL RITUALS WERE OFTEN THE FIRST AND MOST WIDELY ADOPTED STRATEGY, SETTING THE STAGE FOR FORMAL INSTRUCTION

There are many approaches to embedding SEL into a student’s day. One approach is formal SEL curricula with scripted lessons and a scope and sequence (i.e., the topics and concepts in the curriculum and the order in which they are taught) for delivering content. A second approach is integration of SEL into academic lessons (e.g., teaching empathy by having students identify with characters’ experiences and emotions in an English language arts unit).

A third approach, and the one that the case study schools and OST programs adopted early and most widely, was short SEL

rituals. These are targeted rituals that can be used in a variety of settings by a variety of staff roles, require relatively little training to put into practice, and are often used to create an inviting climate. For their short SEL rituals, each case study site adopted some, if not all, of the three practices that CASEL recommends:

1. warm welcomes (e.g., high fives, welcoming questions, or morning meetings at the start of the school day)
2. engaging practices (e.g., brain breaks, such as playing Simon Says or practicing mindful breathing in between lessons or activities)
3. optimistic closures (e.g., providing opportunities after a lesson or activity for students to reflect on what they learned or identify next steps).

The case study sites used the warm welcomes and optimistic closures at the start and end of instructional sessions, at the start and end of the school or OST program day, or both. Several sites also used calming transitions to help students prepare for moving from one activity to the next. In some, but not all, instances, adopting SEL rituals was a stepping-stone to more time-consuming and in-depth SEL lessons. Particularly in the OST programs, which often lacked an SEL curriculum designed specifically for OST settings, SEL rituals became a central part, or even the sum total, of their SEL work. These rituals were the key mechanism for ensuring consistency in SEL across the school-OST day for students.

THEME 6

PRIORITIZING TIME FOR SEL IN SCHEDULES WAS IMPORTANT TO MAKING IMPLEMENTATION ROUTINE

Three of the schools and OST programs that we studied created schedules for when and where to implement SEL, as opposed to leaving this determination up to individual teachers or staff. Scheduling blocks of time in the school and OST weekly schedule

made the work more concrete and attainable. Notably, in each of these cases, the school or OST program built dedicated time for SEL in the schedule and then allowed for some flexibility within that schedule. In Tacoma, the school reserved time in the master schedule for 30-minute daily explicit SEL lessons and provided teachers with four SEL lessons per week; teachers could choose which lessons they implemented on which day, and they could use the fifth weekday to complete or revisit any lesson that needed more time. In Dallas, teachers and OST instructors were expected each day to use three brief SEL rituals regularly in their own interactions with students but could decide when and how to do so. The school also reserved “SEL Thursday” for explicit instruction from the SEL curriculum, while the OST program taught three lessons per week from a curriculum created specifically for the OST program to reinforce the school-day SEL curriculum. In Denver, the school adjusted its breakfast-in-the-classroom slot to make more time for SEL, extending this slot to 30 minutes each day, and created a dedicated SEL block during OST programming. Staff were also expected to use short SEL rituals throughout the day, in school-wide assemblies, and during family nights. Teachers and OST staff could decide to focus on lessons that they found most relevant for any given week. Dedicating specific time for SEL instruction, coupled with flexibility for instructional staff, helped make it become part of normal day-to-day operations.

THEME 7

FORMAL SEL RESOURCES FACILITATED A CONSISTENT APPROACH WITHIN AND ACROSS SCHOOL AND OST PROGRAM SETTINGS

Formal, written SEL resources, such as guidance documents, coupled with professional development in their use, facilitated consistent, widespread SEL implementation within the school or OST program, as well as across the two settings. In particular, written resources contributed to the sustainability of both SEL instruction

and school–OST program partnerships, which is important, given staff turnover. Codifying the specifics of SEL implementation in writing is a way to preserve institutional knowledge.

There were a variety of approaches to creating the written SEL resources and then coaching staff on how to use them. In some cases, the approach was through use of a shared set of written SEL lessons. In Palm Beach County, the school and OST program used parallel templates for the structure of the school’s morning meeting and the OST program’s afternoon meeting and made efforts to sequence the OST SEL lessons to cover the same topics on the same timeline as during the school day. In Boston, coaches from the district and the OSTI coordinated with each other to achieve a consistent approach in their training to the respective school and OST program staff and, by extension, those staff’s consistent approach to SEL instruction.

Some sites also documented expectations for SEL in writing. In Dallas, a “SEL binder” contained information about how the SEL committee was run; SEL guidance documents for school and OST program staff; and a staff primer detailing expectations, schedules, and protocols for SEL. Similarly, in Tacoma, the SEL committee revisited a list of nonnegotiables for SEL—including expectations for SEL classroom materials, calming strategies, warm greetings, and peace corners (a safe space supporting students’ self-regulation)—throughout the year to ensure consistency in the approach to SEL. In Denver, the school used visuals with messages about SEL throughout the school building (e.g., lanyards, posters, bulletin boards devoted to SEL) to serve as reminders to staff (and students) of the school and OST program’s approach to SEL. For example, the lanyards worn by staff provided a quick guide to two SEL approaches (calm-down strategies and steps for problem-solving) that both staff and students could reference when putting these SEL approaches into practice.

The principal, OST manager, and members of the SEL committee were typically the ones to distribute these resources to staff and ensure that staff were properly trained in their use. In some cases, this involved adapting the materials to fit the needs of the staff and students. For example, in Tacoma, school leaders adapted lessons from different SEL, restorative practices, and racial justice curricula to create a scope and sequence that met their goal of addressing equity through SEL, leading to greater buy-in among

staff. In all six case study sites, SEL coaches from the district or OSTI (or both) also made site visits to aid instructors in delivering and tailoring SEL instruction to students. In Denver, SEL coaches from the OSTI created SEL materials that fit the needs of Denver's OST programs and were easier for staff to use.

THEME 8

DISTRIBUTING OWNERSHIP OF SEL ACROSS STAFF AND STUDENTS INCREASED BUY-IN AND SUSTAINABILITY

The school and OST program partners recognized that for SEL to be sustained, staff must have a sense of ownership of the work. They put several strategies in place to achieve not only staff buy-in but also distributed leadership of the SEL work. In Dallas, for example, school and OST program leaders worked to distribute responsibility for SEL across staff, including the counselor, teachers, and OST instructors, such that by 2020–2021, SEL became part of the everyday routine for people in these roles, and the SEL committee began to meet less frequently. In the Boston case study site, the OST program director gave staff autonomy over how to incorporate SEL practices into activities, with support from coaches, which built staff excitement for SEL. In Tacoma, staff buy-in came from identifying teacher SEL champions and putting them in leadership positions to guide school-wide SEL implementation and from soliciting teacher feedback on SEL implementation—including the amount of time spent on SEL instruction, the content and perceived quality of professional development, and proposed changes to the SEL scope and sequence—and acting on that feedback to improve school-wide SEL.

Shared ownership extended to students. In Palm Beach County, the school created a Teachers of Tomorrow student team that met with the SEL champion and provided feedback on school activities impacting students, thereby building students' responsible decisionmaking skills. Students were also given a choice of SEL

activities throughout their day (for example, students selected their own warm welcome greetings and brain break activities).

PREPANDEMIC SEL EXPERIENCE HELPED SCHOOLS AND OST PROGRAMS RESPOND TO COVID-19 DISRUPTIONS

In all the case study sites, SEL was seen as critical during the pandemic, and staff broadly agreed that their approach to SEL helped students and staff cope with the pandemic. The school or OST program in each case drew upon and often adapted the SEL experiences that they had built prior to the pandemic, enabling each to continue SEL implementation throughout the pandemic. When faced with unprecedented challenges, they did not need to create something new. Understanding how these staff relied on their prior SEL work and adapted it provides lessons for other schools and OST programs to build up their ability to weather future disruptions to learning.

The SEL strategies and routines developed prepandemic were essential to supporting student and staff social and emotional needs during school closures, virtual learning, and the transition back to in-person instruction. The partnerships' experience with SEL also positioned them to more easily understand how to adapt their SEL strategies to virtual learning and then to social distancing during in-person learning. They figured out which approaches would transition well (e.g., morning meetings and brain breaks), which would require adaptations (e.g., welcoming rituals that relied on in-person contact), and which would be the most challenging to carry out virtually (e.g., SEL activities that provided opportunities for student-to-student communication and teamwork). Brain breaks became an important strategy to combat Zoom fatigue and boost student engagement in virtual learning. SEL rituals like warm welcomes and optimistic closures helped build relationships virtually and gave both students and staff opportunities to discuss the challenges of the pandemic and their associated emotions.

Case study sites reported that jointly navigating the challenges of the pandemic strengthened the partnership between the school and OST program, even when the partners had fewer opportunities to collaborate. Several case study sites also noted that they deepened their SEL engagement with families during the pandemic. They sought to equip families with SEL activities to do at home during virtual learning, which gave families access to, and insight into, their students' learning environment.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The six cases we studied differed at least somewhat in terms of their SEL foci, schedule, and curricula and the adults most central to the work. Although all had a SEL committee, some focused more time and energy on strengthening it. Some schools had pre-existing relationships with OST partners, and others had to create new ones. Some jumped right into SEL instruction for students, while others spent more time developing social and emotional competencies in adults. The connection between SEL and other priorities and initiatives (equity, student behavior systems) also varied from site to site.

Despite the variation in their approaches to SEL, there were quite a few common themes across the case studies. Each case study site benefited from engaged leadership and an organizing SEL committee and intentionally built distributive ownership of the work that enabled SEL to take hold. No matter the specific goal of SEL at each site, it was essential that each took concrete steps to achieve its vision: building SEL into the schedule, formally documenting in writing the approach to SEL, dedicating time for staff professional development and learning, and adopting short SEL rituals that could be used throughout the students' day.

While these lessons are not definitive, we have confidence that they hold for a wide variety of contexts because they comport with our prior SEL implementation research and with other education implementation research about the importance of committed leaders,¹⁵ distributed leadership,¹⁶ and clearly defined and well-specified processes.¹⁷ Likewise, we expect that these six schools and OST programs' comprehensive SEL implementation should have positive effects for children because meta-analyses of hundreds of comprehensive SEL strategies show such effects.¹⁸

Nevertheless, we note that all of the programs we study are in urban settings and serve a high proportion of elementary-age students from historically disadvantaged groups, and it is possible that the themes we highlighted are less applicable for secondary schools, low-poverty settings, or rural or suburban settings. Our analysis is also based on six cases, which are too few to draw firm conclusions about the exact sequencing of SEL implementation or about what is and is not essential for school–OST program partnerships about SEL. In a future report, we will conduct quantitative and qualitative analyses of all 38 school–OST program partners that implemented SEL programming in the first four years of PSELI and the additional 38 partners from the same communities that did not. These analyses will allow us to draw firmer conclusions about numerous aspects of SEL implementation. With those caveats in mind, the commonality of lessons, despite the variety of SEL approaches that the six school and OST programs took, indicates that other schools and OST programs can also benefit from these lessons.

APPENDIX

Background on Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning

Altogether, 38 school–OST program partnerships worked to implement SEL throughout the school and afterschool day during the first four years of PSELI, which was the 2017–2018 through the 2020–2021 school years. Another 38 demographically similar school–OST program partnerships from the same six communities continued business as usual and could elect to implement any new SEL of their choosing in the third year of PSELI and beyond.

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

1. Set a positive climate.
2. Offer explicit SEL instruction to students during the school day; SEL instruction during OST programs was optional.
3. Integrate SEL into academic instruction and OST activities.
4. Pursue school–OST partnerships that mutually reinforce SEL practices across the school and OST program day.

For more-extensive background about the PSELI design and partners, please see the first report of the series, *Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning* (www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1).

Our Methods for the Six Case Studies

The case studies are one part of a larger mixed-methods study of PSELI over four years in six cities. Based on interview and observation data from fall 2017, spring 2018, and spring 2019, we identified school–OST program partners with unique, high-quality approaches to their SEL work. We proposed these as candidates for case studies to the district and OSTI leads of PSELI, sometimes changing the partnership in response to the district and OSTI leads' suggestions. In fall 2019, we had finalized the six case study sites, each highlighting a particular aspect of the initiative (e.g., focus on racial equity within SEL, strong school–OST partnership). We then expanded our data collection activities at

each of these sites to get a more in-depth understanding of their approaches to SEL implementation.

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

As shown in Table A.1, we drew on a large amount of data that we collected as part of our research about PSEL. We drew on interviews, extensive observations, and surveys of staff.

TABLE A.1
Data We Drew on for the Case Studies

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

NOTES: Blank cells mean that the data category was not part of the planned collection at that given time point.

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

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

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

* = collected at case study sites only.

ABBREVIATIONS

BGCD	Boys & Girls Clubs of Dorchester
CASEL	Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
OST	out-of-school-time
OSTI	out-of-school-time intermediary
PSELI	Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative
SEL	social and emotional learning
TMAS	Thriving Minds After School

ENDNOTES

¹ A wide variety of providers run OST programs, including nonprofit and for-profit organizations and some school districts. They range in size from small, community-based organizations to national chains. They are funded primarily by parent fees, but some also receive public funding (such as 21st Century Community Learning Center grants) or philanthropic investments (such as from the United Way). The programs can be thematically focused or offer a variety of activities, including supervised time for homework or free play. The OST programs in these case studies typically enrolled 5 to 20 percent of a school's enrollees, and their hours ranged from as little as one lunch period per week to as much as several afterschool hours each weekday.

² Stephanie M. Jones and Suzanne M. Bouffard, "Social and Emotional Learning in Schools: From Programs to Strategies and Commentaries," *Social Policy Report*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2012, pp. 1–33; and Roger P. Weissberg and Jason Cascarino, "Academic Learning + Social-Emotional Learning = National Priority," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 95, No. 2, 2013, pp. 8–13.

³ OSTIs can take a variety of forms, including a single nonprofit organization or a network of agencies that work together. They carry out such functions as allocating funding, setting standards, monitoring programming quality, and communicating with the public. Some of them directly fund OST programming, but many do not and instead serve a coordinating and organizing function for a community's OST programs.

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

⁵ Boston's PSELI work was guided by a vision document, "Portrait of a Social-Emotional Learner," that merged the Boston Public School's SEL standards with Boston After School & Beyond's Achieve-Connect-Thrive (ACT) Framework, outlining the skills that

students need for success. For more-detailed definitions, see the Boston case study.

⁶ Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, “What Is SEL?” webpage, undated. As of February 23, 2020: <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>. CASEL has since updated this definition as of October 2020 to emphasize how SEL can advance educational equity and excellence. Our report uses the earlier CASEL definition, because it was the foundational one that most PSELI communities used at the time of the case study work. Equity is a growing focus for many PSELI communities, but this is in the early stages for most, and equity was not a foundational definition of SEL at the outset of PSELI.

⁷ Rebecca D. Taylor, Eva Oberle, Joseph A. Durlak, and Roger P. Weissberg, “Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects,” *Child Development*, Vol. 88, No. 4, 2017, pp. 1156–1171; and Joseph A. Durlak, Roger P. Weissberg, Allison B. Dymnicki, Rebecca D. Taylor, and Kriston B. Schellinger, “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions,” *Child Development*, Vol. 82, 2011, pp. 405–432.

⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Beyond Academic Learning: First Results from the Survey of Social and Emotional Skills*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021; Lex Borghans, Angela Lee Duckworth, James J. Heckman, and Bas ter Weel, “The Economics and Psychology of Personality Traits,” *Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 43, No. 4, 2008, pp. 972–1059; Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, Nathaniel Hilger, Emmanuel Saez, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Danny Yagan, “How Does Your Kindergarten Classroom Affect Your Earnings? Evidence from Project STAR,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 126, No. 4, 2011, pp. 1593–1660; and Terrie E. Moffitt et al., “A Gradient of Childhood Self-Control Predicts Health, Wealth, and Public Safety,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 108, No. 7, 2011, pp. 2693–2698.

⁹ Joseph A. Durlak, Roger P. Weissberg, Allison B. Dymnicki, Rebecca D. Taylor, and Kriston B. Schellinger, “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions,” *Child Development*, Vol. 82, No. 1, January/February 2011, pp. 405–432; Sean Grant, Laura S. Hamilton, Stephani L. Wrabel, Celia J. Gomez,

Anamarie Whitaker, Jennifer T. Leschitz, Fatih Unlu, Emilio R. Chavez-Herrerias, Garrett Baker, Mark Barrett, Mark Harris, and Alyssa Ramos, *Social and Emotional Learning Interventions Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2133-WF, 2017. As of January 23, 2019: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2133.html; Mark T. Greenberg, Roger P. Weissberg, Mary Utne O'Brien, Joseph E. Zins, Linda Fredericks, Hank Resnik, and Maurice J. Elias, "Enhancing School-Based Prevention and Youth Development Through Coordinated Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 58, Nos. 6–7, 2003, pp. 466–474; Noelle Hurd and Nancy Deutsch, "SEL-Focused After-School Programs," *Future of Children*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Spring 2017, pp. 95–115; and Joseph L. Mahoney, Joseph A. Durlak, and Roger P. Weissberg, "An Update on Social and Emotional Learning Outcome Research," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 100, No. 4, 2018, pp. 18–23.

¹⁰ Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, "What Is SEL?" webpage, undated. As of February 23, 2020: <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>

¹¹ Amrit Thapa, Jonathan Cohen, Shawn Guffey, and Ann Higgins-D'Alessandro, "A Review of School Climate Research," *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 83, No. 3, 2013, pp. 357–385; Bridget K. Hamre and Robert C. Pianta, "Can Instructional and Emotional Support in the First-Grade Classroom Make a Difference for Children at Risk of School Failure?" *Child Development*, Vol. 76, No. 5, 2005, pp. 949–967; and Elaine M. Allensworth, Camille A. Farrington, Molly F. Gordon, David W. Johnson, Kylie Klein, Bronwyn McDaniel, and Jenny Nagaoka, *Supporting Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: Research Implications for Educators*, Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2018.

¹² Ann-Marie Faria, Kimberly Kendziora, Leah Brown, Breanna O'Brien, and David Osher, *PATHS Implementation and Outcome Study in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District*, Arlington, Va.: American Institutes of Research, June 2013; Kimberly Kendziora and Nick Yoder, *When Districts Support and Integrate Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): Findings from an Ongoing Evaluation of Districtwide Implementation of SEL*, Arlington, Va.: Education Policy Center at American Institutes for Research, October 2016.

¹³ Heather L. Schwartz, Laura S. Hamilton, Susannah Faxon-Mills, Celia J. Gomez, Alice Huguet, Lisa H. Jaycox, Jennifer T. Leschitz, Andrea Prado Tuma, Katie Tosh, Anamarie A. Whitaker, and Stephani L. Wrabel, *Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A379-1, 2020. As of June 22, 2022: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA379-1.html

¹⁴ Restorative practices were described by one Lister staff person as “community circles where students strengthen relationship building and restorative conversations where students focus on accountability by identifying needs or instances of harm done and finding ways to repair relationships that have been negatively impacted by harm.”

¹⁵ Heather C. Hill and Anna Erickson, “Using Implementation Fidelity to Aid in Interpreting Program Impacts: A Brief Review,” *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 48, No. 9, 2019, pp. 590–598; Christopher Day, Qing Gu, and Pam Sammons, “The Impact of Leadership on Student Outcomes: How Successful School Leaders Use Transformational and Instructional Strategies to Make a Difference,” *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2016, pp. 221–258.

¹⁶ James P. Spillane, “Leadership and Learning: Conceptualizing Relations Between School Administrative Practice and Instructional Practice,” *Societies*, Vol. 5, 2015, pp. 277–294.

¹⁷ Stephanie Jones, Rebecca Bailey, Katharine Brush, and Jennifer Kahn, *Kernels of Practice for SEL: Low-Cost, Low-Burden Strategies*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Graduate School of Education, December 2017; and Elaine M. Allensworth, Camille A. Farrington, Molly F. Gordon, David W. Johnson, Kylie Klein, Bronwyn McDaniel, and Jenny Nagaoka, *Supporting Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: Research Implications for Educators*, Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2018.

¹⁸ Rebecca D. Taylor, Eva Oberle, Joseph A. Durlak, and Roger P. Weissberg, “Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects,” *Child Development*, Vol. 88, No. 4, 2017, pp. 1156–1171; and Joseph A. Durlak, Roger P. Weissberg, Allison B. Dymnicki, Rebecca D. Taylor, and Kriston B. Schellinger, “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions,” *Child Development*, Vol. 82, No. 1, 2011, pp. 405–432.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

RAND Education and Labor

The SEL case studies, as well as the full PSELI study, were undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking.

This research was commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, which seeks to support and share effective ideas and practices to improve learning and enrichment opportunities for children and the vitality of the arts for everyone. For more information and research on these and other related topics, please visit its Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

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

The Wallace Foundation's Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI) is a six-year initiative that The Wallace Foundation launched in 2017 to explore whether and how children benefit when schools and their out-of-school-time programs partner

to improve social and emotional learning (SEL), as well as what it takes to do this work. The six communities that participate in PSELI are Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

According to the Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning, SEL is "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions."

Six case studies spotlight specific approaches to implementing SEL. This cross-cutting report briefly summarizes each case and highlights shared themes among them. Themes include implementing SEL by building adults' SEL skills before building children's SEL skills and sustaining SEL work even as staff turn over by distributing leadership.

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