



LESSONS FROM THE PARTNERSHIPS FOR  
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INITIATIVE

VOLUME 2, PART 7

# Learning to Focus on Adult Social and Emotional Learning First in Tulsa

One of Six Case Studies of Schools and  
Out-of-School-Time Program Partners

KAREN CHRISTIANSON, CELIA J. GOMEZ,  
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# HOW ONE TULSA SCHOOL AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME PROGRAM PARTNER LEARNED TO FIRST INVEST IN ADULTS

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## **About the SEL Case Studies**

The SEL case studies feature partnerships between elementary schools and out-of-school-time (OST) programs in six communities. Each case study spotlights a specific approach to implementing social and emotional learning (SEL). A cross-cutting report briefly summarizes each case and highlights shared themes among them. That report can be found at [www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4).

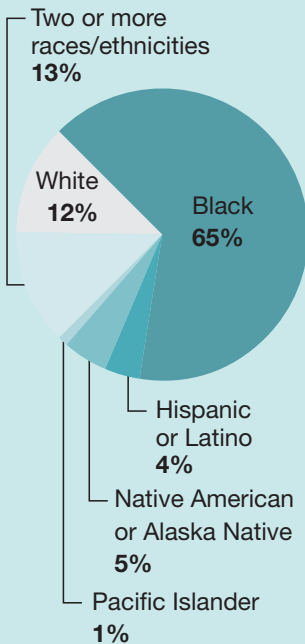
Although there is no consensus definition of SEL, most of the school and OST programs relied on the following widely used definition at the time: SEL is “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”<sup>1</sup>

The six school–OST program partnerships that we feature belong to 76 total school–OST program partnerships involved in the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI). Half of the 76 partnerships started their SEL work in 2017–2018, and the other half could choose to start their work in 2019–2020. PSELI is a six-year initiative that The Wallace Foundation launched in 2017 to explore whether and how children benefit when schools and their OST programs partner to improve 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.

The RAND Corporation serves as the research partner on PSELI and is responsible for gathering implementation and outcome data from PSELI participants in each of the six communities and producing a series of reports that share useful lessons with the broader field.

## Whitman Demographics as of 2017–2018

Percentage of students by  
race/ethnicity



**93%**

Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch



**2%**

Percentage of English language learners



**2 years**

Median years of experience (teachers)

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

This case study highlights the social and emotional learning (SEL) work of Whitman Elementary in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and its out-of-school-time (OST) partner, Youth at Heart, over four school years: 2017–2018 through 2020–2021. The elementary school is located in North Tulsa and serves approximately 350 students, in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. Youth at Heart is a local nonprofit organization located on Whitman’s campus that provides enrichment activities such as sports, computing, and art to approximately 100 of the students at the school for three hours a day, four days a week. The organization runs the Whitman afterschool program with funding from a 21st Century Community Learning Center grant, a federal program that provides funds for OST enrichment programming for high poverty schools. Most years, at least half of the Youth at Heart staff also work in the school as teachers or paraprofessionals, as is typical in many 21st-Century-funded OST programs. The partnership between Whitman and Youth and Heart predates 2017, when this case study starts and when they first introduced SEL into their joint work.

As noted in “About the SEL Case Studies” above, Whitman and Youth at Heart were part of a larger effort to promote SEL that was led by Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) and The Opportunity Project (The Opp), a nonprofit intermediary organization that coordinates Tulsa’s OST programs. Locally known as Relate 918 (named for the city’s area code), this initiative consisted of five school-OST partnerships in Tulsa that worked to incorporate SEL throughout their school and OST programming. After a planning year, Relate 918 partnerships launched their effort to teach students social and emotional skills in the 2018–2019 school year.

This case study focuses on Whitman and Youth at Heart’s path to prioritizing adult SEL as the route to

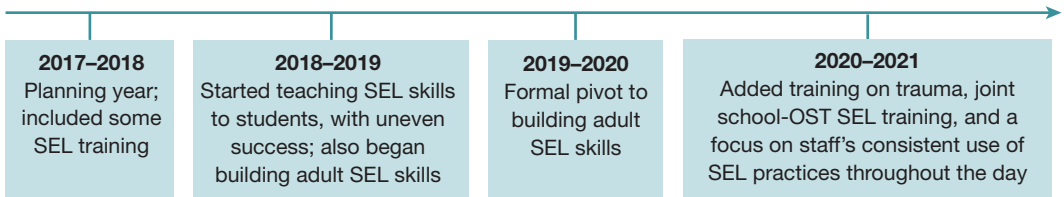
support students’ social and emotional development. As shown in Figure 1, they adapted the focus of their partnership over the years that this case study covers (2017 to 2021). After first trying to teach SEL skills to students in 2018, they then worked together to build in adults the same social and emotional skills that they hoped to promote among students, such as regulating one’s emotions and building trusting relationships. Their pivot from student SEL to adult SEL was motivated by a desire 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. In 2020–2021, despite being largely online due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, school and OST program staff continued to work in tandem to develop students’ social and emotional skills.

In the sections that follow, we describe the trajectory of the partners’ work shown in Figure 1. In so doing, we highlight the strategies they applied to support their vision, lessons learned, and the outcomes of their work. We also note how they adapted their SEL work during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude by highlighting their successes, the challenges they faced and how they worked to overcome them, and the factors that enabled their successes. The appendix summarizes the data we collected and how we analyzed them for this report.

### The key individuals who led the SEL work at Whitman and Youth at Heart:

- the assistant principal, who served as the SEL champion, a paid role at each of the five Relate 918 schools that was designed to coordinate all SEL efforts and trainings, starting in fall 2018
- the OST program director, who co-led the monthly SEL committee meetings with the assistant principal (four different people held this role over the four-year case study)
- the school principal, who worked with the SEL champion to help shape and oversee progress on Whitman’s SEL goals (two different people held this role over the four-year case study)

FIGURE 1  
Timeline of Whitman and Youth at Heart’s SEL Partnership



# INCONSISTENT SEL INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS LED THE SCHOOL TO PIVOT AND FOCUS ON ADULT SEL

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## BOX 1

### Whitman and Youth at Heart's SEL Resources

**RULER Mood Meter**—a visual tool to help students' name their emotions

**RULER Charter**—a collaborative document created by educators and students to establish shared class guidelines and norms

**RULER Feeling Words**—a SEL curriculum to help students describe the full range of emotions. The curriculum focuses on vocabulary words that identify feelings and emotions.

**MindUP**—a SEL curriculum focused on developing SEL skills

**PeekAPak**—a SEL program to teach SEL concepts through stories and games

Whitman and Youth at Heart had uneven success when they started their effort to teach students social and emotional skills in the 2018–2019 school year.

They each decided to adopt several of the resources shown in Box 1 for the 2018–2019 school year. All Relate 918 schools and OST programs, including Whitman and Youth at Heart, were to use, at a minimum, the Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, Regulating (RULER) Mood Meter, the RULER Charter, and SEL signature practices.<sup>2</sup>

Whitman went on to specify that its teachers were to use the Mood Meter daily at the morning meeting, create the RULER Charter for their classroom at the beginning of the year, and use the signature practices throughout the day. They also added that Whitman teachers should teach four feeling words each month from RULER Feeling Words and deliver a MindUP lesson at least once a month. Meanwhile, Youth at Heart specified that its staff were to use PeekAPak with their K–2 students (twice a week), conduct a daily RULER Mood Meter check-in with students in grades 3–5, and use SEL signature practices throughout the day.

By the end of the 2018–2019 school year, teachers reported inconsistent use of these SEL resources with their students. Only 17 percent of Whitman teachers reported using written lesson plans, and 50 percent reported incorporating SEL rituals (e.g., the morning meeting or another welcoming ritual) on our 2019 spring survey—substantially smaller percentages of teachers than the four other Relate 918 schools. Our

three-day observation in spring 2019 confirmed what teachers had reported on the staff survey. We observed explicit SEL instruction in one-quarter of the 17 Whitman classes we observed, which was half the rate we observed in the other four Relate 918 schools.

In contrast, we observed explicit SEL instruction in one-third of Youth at Heart instructional sessions, which was over twice as often as in other Relate 918 OST programs. The higher rates of SEL instruction at Youth at Heart suggest that OST program instructors were better prepared to incorporate SEL into their programming, while teachers needed additional support. This may be because Youth at Heart staff on average had over twice as many years of experience as Whitman teachers.

Whitman administrators recognized that expecting teachers to use four new and different resources to embed SEL into the school day with minimal training might have been too much for teachers, many of whom were relatively new. In fall 2019, the principal shared, “I think that when we tried to infuse MindUP, and we tried to infuse all these other different pieces. . . it felt heavy for teachers, and they’re like, ‘Gosh, I don’t know what to do.’” High teacher turnover at Whitman<sup>3</sup> led to a high proportion of novice teachers who school administrators described as struggling to teach social and emotional skills. Having so many new teachers each year also made it difficult to deepen SEL instruction beyond SEL signature practices and the Mood Meter.

Low adoption at Whitman may also have been due to insufficient SEL training. Though teachers were trained in SEL instruction during the prior planning year and throughout the 2018–2019 school year, several reported that the training did not contain enough information and expressed a desire for more modeling of how to use the SEL resources. The train-the-trainer model Relate 918 adopted may have lowered the training quality. While school administrators did attend a developer-led RULER training in the summer of 2018, the 2017–2018 OST program director described most of the SEL training as a game of telephone—district and out-of-school-time intermediary (OSTI)<sup>4</sup> staff received formal training and then trained school and OST administrators, who trained teachers and OST program instructors. The OST program director also reported that this approach caused the initial SEL guidance to be confusing.



Two factors led Whitman to pivot in 2019–2020 to prioritize adults’ SEL. The first was that administrators believed that teacher turnover might decline if teachers felt better prepared to support students and better connected to the school. In spring 2018, the SEL champion shared, “I think as [teachers] feel more prepared, not ambushed, then they’re more likely to stay. And the happier they are, the more pleasant kids’ experiences are.” Building from this sentiment, the next year Whitman began focusing on adult relationships to foster belonging and decrease teacher turnover.

## Lesson Learned

When administrators noticed that many teachers were not consistently incorporating SEL into their instruction, they changed their focus to building adults’ social and emotional competencies.

The second factor, which school administrators noted consistently in interviews over the four years of this case study, was that many teachers were not sufficiently prepared to support students who had experienced trauma. In spring 2018, the SEL champion described supporting students who had experienced trauma as “our biggest struggle.” Although SEL instruction is not expressly designed for students with trauma, it includes several pedagogical practices that support such students, such as providing calm, predictable transitions for students and teaching skills such as empathy and regulating emotions.

We did not ask Whitman staff and administrators to define what they meant by *trauma*, but community data provides some context. The zip code in which Whitman students live experiences more violent crime than 95 percent of zip codes nationally. Furthermore, 80 percent of the crime in Whitman’s zip code occurs in the north edge, where Whitman Elementary is located.<sup>5</sup> Administrators shared that some students’ trauma stems from having a parent in prison. Whitman is in a majority-Black neighborhood, adjacent to the majority-Black neighborhoods in North Tulsa that were redlined in the 1940s.<sup>6</sup> Racism, a driving force behind redlining and the subsequent concentration of poverty and violence by race or ethnicity, likely plays a role in some of the trauma that Whitman students face. Regardless of the cause, in spring 2019, the SEL champion shared, “[Teachers] understand that there’s

trauma. They understand kids need other things. They just don't know how [to better help them].”

These factors, along with administrators' observations of teachers struggling to regulate their own emotions in the classroom, encouraged Whitman administrators to both loosen their expectations for which SEL resources teachers used and focus more on developing staff's own social and emotional skills.

## BUILDING ADULT COMPETENCIES HELPED IMPROVE STAFF OUTCOMES

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Whitman's and Youth at Heart's focus on adult SEL evolved over time. Partway through the 2018–2019 school year—the timepoint at which school leaders began to shift their focus to adult SEL skill-building—a teacher started an optional SEL book club for fellow teaching staff. This teacher was motivated to organize the book club after discussing gaps in adults' social and emotional skills with the SEL champion. Approximately ten teachers participated in the group, and together they explored mindfulness, feelings of inadequacy, and the Enneagram—a personality test that is used to help people identify both their personality types and strategies that may be helpful for each personality type to use when stressed. For example, a teacher with a “giver” personality type may be prone to criticism and self-despair when stressed; for this personality, practicing mindfulness and acknowledging one's own feelings through journaling can be especially helpful.

By fall 2019, Whitman had pivoted more fully toward adult SEL and adult wellness<sup>7</sup> generally as the primary focus of its SEL trainings. The SEL champion partnered with the same teacher who had started the optional SEL book club to co-lead teacher trainings focused on self-care, self-regulation, and coping with stress. Whitman expanded the Enneagram work done in the book club to include all teachers; in October 2019, we observed its second Enneagram training, in which teachers read about and discussed healthy and unhealthy behaviors related to their personality types and then role-played responding with self-regulation to difficult situations that had occurred in the school. Heading into

the winter holidays, teachers were expected to commit to three pieces of self-care.

The principal and SEL champion also aimed to foster stronger relationships and a sense of belonging among staff. After developing a staff charter<sup>8</sup> in fall 2019, they revised it in February 2020 and renewed their commitments to each other (e.g., looking each other in the eyes when talking).

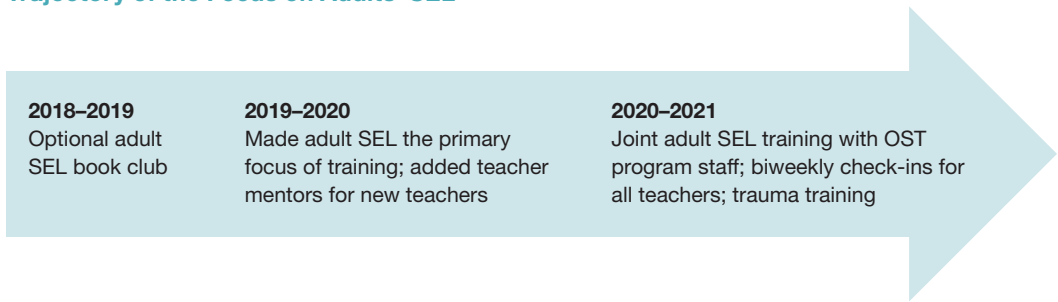
Whitman's emphasis on adult wellness continued in 2020–2021. The SEL champion noted that attention to this subject was especially important given the added stresses caused by the pandemic. To make sure that school staff had their needs met, each teacher had a biweekly individual check-in with either the principal or the SEL champion to discuss how they were doing and what support they could use. Additionally, each new teacher was paired with a mentor teacher who served as a “venting buddy” and advocate for the new teacher. (See Figure 2.)

Youth at Heart also focused on staff wellness in 2020–2021. For example, the OST program director said that she began expressing gratitude toward her staff with regular check-ins, notes, and gifts, to say, “Hey, we appreciate you. We appreciate you being on the team.” Youth at Heart also partnered with Whitman to host a combined training on adult SEL—the first adult SEL training for Youth at Heart staff.

In addition, Whitman and Youth at Heart each held a training for their instructors on the effects of trauma for children and the importance of consistency from caring adults. The fall 2020 training for school staff emphasized how consistency—particularly in routines and classroom management—is needed to create a safe learning environment for students who have experienced trauma. Though the training did not explicitly promote the use of adult SEL practices, administrators believed that by equipping educators with the skills they need to support students more effectively with trauma, they would in turn feel more competent and less overwhelmed. Several school staff wellness trainings throughout the year also noted the importance of teachers processing their own trauma so that they can more effectively support students.

Both school and OST program staff reported improvements in educators' social and emotional skills over time. In 2019–2020 and 2020–2021, administrators observed teachers being more patient

FIGURE 2  
**Trajectory of the Focus on Adults' SEL**



with students and more likely to positively engage with them rather than becoming frustrated, which tended to provoke student misbehavior. In March 2020, prior to pandemic-related school closures, we observed a teacher modeling how to calm herself when her class became noisy. She told her class that she needed to decompress, set a timer, and instructed students to work independently on their computers as she sat at her desk. Getting teachers to acknowledge their own emotions has been “some of the most impactful” work, according to the principal, who explained that when teachers recognize that they are exhausted and seek help, they are able to better engage their students. Both the principal and SEL champion also reported that teachers’ self-care (e.g., taking a break from work over the weekend, getting more exercise) improved. OST program instructors also noted that they observed each other’s social and emotional skills improving. One OST program instructor shared in spring 2021, “SEL works with adults. I’ve seen some adults who can get frustrated quickly, but now they know how to actually take a breather themselves.”

Finally, school staff burnout and turnover decreased as Relate 918 progressed up until the 2020–2021 school year, which was the first full school year affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The percentage of Whitman staff who reported feeling burned out was cut by more than half from 62 percent in spring 2018 to 29 percent in spring 2020, and staff turnover dropped from 33 to 23 percent over the same time period. Whitman’s

### **Lesson Learned**

Strengthening adult competencies corresponded to declines in school staff burnout and turnover.

emphasis on building adult competencies and staff relationships might also be linked to declining staff turnover.

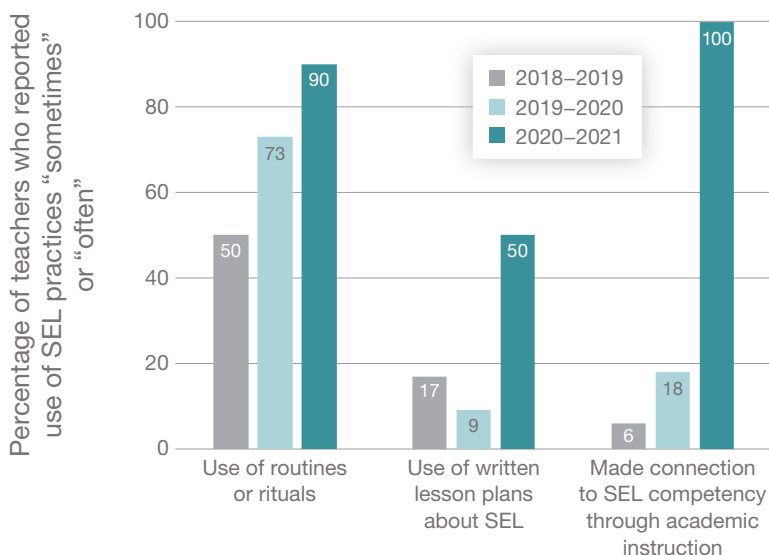
## PRIORITIZING ADULT SEL, TRAUMA TRAINING, AND SCHOOL-OST COLLABORATION WAS ASSOCIATED WITH MORE- CONSISTENT SEL INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS

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As Whitman prioritized adult SEL, more teachers began to teach social and emotional skills to students. As shown in Figure 3, the percentage of teachers who reported incorporating short SEL rituals, using an SEL lesson plan, or integrating SEL into academic instruction increased significantly from spring 2019 to spring 2021. By spring 2021, all Whitman teachers who responded to the survey reported that they were incorporating SEL into their academic instruction—a higher proportion than at other Relate 918 schools. (Note, however, that a lower rate of survey participation that we list below Figure 3 might skew the results.) After observing instruction in spring 2021, both the principal and SEL champion shared that teachers were more confident teaching students social and emotional skills and incorporating them into academics.

Administrators believed that their increased focus on adult SEL starting in 2019–2020 helped improve buy-in for teaching students social and emotional skills. In spring 2020, the SEL champion shared, “If we could start over again, we would start with adult practices before we tried to roll it out to the building. [By] rolling it out to the building and then working backwards to adults, we lost some of the buy-in. I wish we had done it differently from the beginning.” The increase in SEL instruction was not due to new requirements; administrators expected teachers to implement a similar number of SEL practices in 2020–2021 as in the two years prior, though they were no longer required to use MindUP lesson plans.

FIGURE 3  
**Percentage of Whitman Teachers Who Reported Use of SEL Practices**



NOTES: The figure depicts the percentage of Whitman teachers who indicated on the RAND staff survey that they sometimes or often do the following three activities: “Using routines or rituals to preview the day and discuss SEL concepts (e.g., morning meetings or other welcoming rituals),” “Using written lesson plans about SEL (e.g., teaching a lesson plan from an SEL curriculum),” and “Making connections to SEL competencies through your academic instruction (e.g., perseverance in solving a math problem or describing a character’s emotions in a book).” The drop in use of written lesson plans in 2019–2020 can likely be attributed to administrators removing the requirement in 2019–2020 to conduct MindUP lessons. 82, 71, and 70 percent of Whitman school staff took the survey in spring 2019, spring 2020, and spring 2021, respectively.

Part of the increased frequency of SEL instruction and practices might be attributed to Whitman’s new focus on prioritizing consistency in adult practice throughout the day as a way to better support students with trauma. Prior to the 2020–2021 school year, most of the supports for students experiencing trauma were provided outside of the classroom (i.e., by counselors). By 2020–2021, however, all staff were tasked with supporting students with trauma by creating a safe, consistent environment and building strong relationships with students that allow educators to identify and help them when something is wrong.

### **Lesson Learned**

Prioritizing adult SEL was associated with educator buy-in and increased provision of SEL to students.

## Lesson Learned

Incorporating common routines and SEL practices throughout the school day and the OST day created a predictable environment for students, which is beneficial for all students, particularly those who have experienced trauma.

Collaboration between Whitman and Youth at Heart staff also generated greater consistency in SEL experiences for students. In 2020–2021, their joint SEL committee designated SEL practices to incorporate in both the school day and the OST day, including the use of the RULER Mood Meter daily, SEL signature practices in each instructional class or OST session, and monthly feeling words. As noted earlier, teachers and OST program instructors also participated in one joint SEL training focused on adult SEL.

To further unify their joint vision for SEL, school and OST program staff collaborated to create a Whitman–Youth at Heart SEL walkthrough tool to facilitate site leaders’ observation of SEL practices across the day. The SEL committee also expanded in 2020–2021 to include two teachers and an additional OST program staff member. Previously, Whitman and Youth at Heart representation had largely been limited to school and OST leaders; including teachers and an OST program instructor helped to further strengthen SEL coordination across the day.

Finally, the large number of staff who worked at both Youth at Heart and Whitman promoted consistency. Because most Youth at Heart staff also had positions at Whitman, they were aware of the SEL practices used during the school day and carried them into the OST program. In addition, they established relationships with students from their work earlier in the school day that they built on after school.

# STUDENTS' SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS AND BEHAVIOR, ALONG WITH SCHOOL CLIMATE, IMPROVED WITH THE CONSISTENT USE OF SEL PRACTICES

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As school and OST program staff began to model and teach SEL practices with more consistency, many staff reported improvements in students' social and emotional skills. Teachers indicated in our annual survey that more of their students were regulating their emotions and maintaining healthy relationships in spring 2021 compared with spring 2018. Both school and OST program staff described students' improved ability to express and regulate their emotions. One OST program instructor shared, “[One student] used to always get so mad, and we told him stop and breathe. After that when he would get mad, he would look at me and say, ‘Breathe, breathe.’ And I’d say, ‘Yes, breathe.’”

Student behavior also improved, both during the school day and after school. The percentage of students receiving at least one in-school or out-of-school suspension dropped between 2017–2018 and 2019–2020, as the school began to use SEL practices more consistently. In spring 2020, fewer teachers called the office for discipline support, according to a noninstructional staff member we interviewed. And between fall 2019 and spring 2021, noninstructional school staff, the SEL champion, and the OST program director all reported that there were fewer fights between students compared with prior years. In spring 2021, an OST program instructor attributed this change in behavior to improvements in students' social and emotional skills:



*“The biggest celebration when people [visit the school is that they say,] ‘It feels good in here.’ Kids are happy. Adults are happy. I feel like a lot of that is attributed to the work that we have done trying to help kids deal with that social emotional component of themselves—how you deal with your trauma.”*

**Kimberly Blakney,**  
principal, Whitman  
Elementary



“They have the tools to use instead of lashing out at each other or getting into fights or arguments.”

Our survey data also indicates improvements in students’ behavior and relationships. From spring 2018 to spring 2021, there were increases in the percentage of staff who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- “Students treat teachers with respect” increased from 24 to 79 percent.
- “Students treat students with respect” increased from 14 to 89 percent.
- “Students care about each other” increased from 38 to 95 percent.

Whitman school administrators reported that stronger adult social and emotional competencies and the consistent use of SEL practices helped to improve the school climate. Improved relationships, as described by the survey data trends, are central to an improved school climate.<sup>9</sup>

## DURING THE PANDEMIC, SEL INSTRUCTION REMAINED STRONG

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After the COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020, the district transitioned to remote learning, and OST programming ended for the remainder of the school year. The district launched the 2020–2021 school year with fully online distance learning and, apart from a brief stint in person in November 2020, remained online until late February 2021. Youth at Heart remained online until April 2021.

### **Lesson Learned**

Consistent use of SEL practices helped both adults and students cope with struggles from the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic disruptions, SEL instruction remained strong, according to school and OST program staff. The school sent SEL resources home to families during online learning so that students could practice at home. These resources included a magnet

Mood Meter to help children identify their emotions and a sand timer to help practice deescalation by using the timer for a cooldown period.

Although Whitman and Youth at Heart continued implementing student SEL activities, they gave teachers more flexibility in which SEL resources they used. Nevertheless, teachers and OST program instructors mostly continued daily use of the Mood Meter and SEL signature practices. In January 2021, teachers and OST program instructors expanded their use of the signature practices so that they were incorporated into each academic class or OST program session, a change that was described positively by both school and OST program staff we interviewed.

In our spring 2021 survey, 90 percent of teachers agreed that Whitman’s focus on SEL helped both them and their students cope with the pandemic. Administrators reported that the need for adult SEL was greater than in past years given the multiple challenges of virtual learning and that their focus on adult wellness—and, in particular, on the importance of self-care and rest—helped teachers to persevere through the pandemic.



*“There’s a lot of frustration [from the pandemic] . . . So [we’re] making sure teachers incorporate some of those SEL components [into classes]. ‘Let’s take a deep breath. Let’s get re-centered.’ I think that incorporating some of our SEL strategies inside of academics has been critical for the success of our teachers and kids this year—more so than ever before.”*

**Kimberly Blakney,**  
principal, Whitman  
Elementary

## CONCLUSION

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This case is an example of the importance of building adult social and emotional skills so that educators can be successful in supporting students’ social and emotional development. Focusing on adults’ social and emotional competencies was one strategy that generated buy-in and built capacity for teachers to enact SEL instruction for elementary age students. To see other strategies, view the summary report, *Strengthening Students’ Social and Emotional Skills: Lessons from Six Case Studies of Schools and Out-of-School-Time Program Partners* ([www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA379-4)), in which we describe approaches such as developing an effective SEL committee that includes a school and OST partner, finding and protecting time for SEL in the

school and afterschool schedules, and incorporating equity into SEL, among others.

There are some notable **successes** in this case study:

- Over the course of Relate 918, the proportion of school staff members who reported feeling burned out more than halved (but increased again during the pandemic), and staff turnover declined by 10 percentage points.
- In the 2020–2021 school year, a focus on consistent SEL practices as a way to support students, particularly those who had experienced trauma, resulted in students experiencing the same SEL resources, signature practices, and monthly SEL words across the school and OST day.
- School and OST program staff alike noticed improvements in both students’ social and emotional skills and behavior, as well as school climate. Students’ improved ability to express and regulate their own emotions corresponded with fewer fights, stronger relationships, and an improved climate.

Whitman and Youth at Heart also experienced some **challenges** that the partnership worked to overcome:

- Because a high proportion of Whitman’s staff were novice teachers, many of them lacked the skills needed to support students, particularly students who had experienced trauma.
- Early on, high turnover rates among teachers and in the OST program director position also made it difficult to deepen SEL instruction beyond the use of SEL signature practices and the Mood Meter, because each year, many staff members were introduced to SEL for the first time.
- Turnover in the OST program director position each year also made it difficult initially to coordinate SEL work across the school and OST day.

There are several overarching factors that facilitated these successes and helped to mitigate these challenges at Whitman and Youth at Heart:

- School leaders adapted their SEL approach over time to better fit the needs of their school. When initially their teachers struggled to incorporate SEL into instruction and support students who had experienced trauma, school leaders turned to building adults’ social and emotional skills and providing training on how to support students experiencing trauma.

- Prioritizing adult SEL helped to strengthen adult social and emotional skills, allowing teachers to better model these skills, and increase buy-in for SEL instruction. This focus on adult SEL corresponded to declines in teacher burnout and turnover. Administrators described helping teachers acknowledge their emotions as “some of the most impactful” work of Relate 918 and something they wished they had started earlier.
- A switch to focusing on SEL practices, as opposed to SEL lesson plans, and reducing the number of SEL resources also helped teachers more consistently incorporate SEL. The multiple SEL resources that Whitman had initially tried to incorporate overwhelmed staff, particularly novice teachers. Prioritizing SEL signature practices such as “optimistic closures” at the end of a lesson to highlight the importance of what was learned allowed teachers to embed SEL more consistently throughout the day.
- Regular meetings, shared training, and staff who worked for both the school and the OST program helped to coordinate their SEL efforts across the day, creating greater consistency in SEL instruction for students.

Finally, the consistent use of SEL practices helped both adults and students cope during the pandemic. Whitman staff reported a continued focus on adult SEL and expanded use of SEL practices. Teachers reported that SEL was beneficial to both them and their students during the pandemic, and school and OST program staff reported improvements in students’ SEL skills as well.

### **Key Takeaways for Helping Adults Be Successful in Supporting Students’ SEL**

- Building adults’ SEL skills (for example, by helping adults recognize their own emotions) helped adults incorporate SEL into instruction and model SEL skills.
- Prioritizing adult SEL also increased buy-in for SEL instruction and corresponded with declines in teacher burnout and turnover.
- Regular meetings and shared trainings promoted consistency between the school and OST SEL instruction.
- A switch to focusing on short SEL rituals, as opposed to lesson plans, helped teachers start to use SEL; they could then later build in explicit SEL instruction.



# APPENDIX

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## Background on Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning

Recognizing the importance of SEL and the potential contributions of both schools and OST programs to youth social and emotional development, The Wallace Foundation launched 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.

Starting in summer 2017, The Wallace Foundation awarded annual implementation grants to each of the following six communities: Boston, Massachusetts; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Palm Beach County, Florida; Tacoma, Washington; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. These grants were awarded jointly to school districts and OSTIs in each community. These districts and OSTIs then allocated some of these funds to a cohort of schools and OST programs—ranging from five to seven partnerships in each community—to collaborate to improve climate and to foster SEL that is mutually reinforced during and outside the school day.

Altogether, 38 school–OST program partnerships worked to implement SEL programming throughout the school and after-school day during the first four years of PSELI. 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 fourth 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.

The RAND Corporation serves as the research partner on PSELI and is responsible for gathering implementation and outcome data from PSELI participants in each of the six communities. These case studies are part of a series of reports RAND will publish about PSELI. 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](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1)), provides more detail on the PSELI initiative.

## Our Methods for This Case Study

For each of the six case studies in this series, we use with permission the actual names of schools, OST programs, and, in some of the cases, individuals. The case studies are part of a larger mixed-methods study of PSELI over four years in six cities. To select the cases, we first identified sites with unique, high-quality approaches to their SEL work based on interview and observation data from fall 2017 through spring 2019. We then proposed these as candidates for case studies to the district and OSTI leads of PSELI, sometimes changing the site 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., explicit SEL instruction, 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.

Note that all six cases are in large urban districts that primarily serve students from historically disadvantaged populations. As such, the lessons we glean from the six case studies may not generalize to all elementary schools. Table A.1 documents the types of data we collected for the PSELI study at large and at the Whitman and Youth at Heart program specifically. Although we did survey Youth at Heart instructors each year, because the number of respondents was less than ten, we are unable to report on these data. When relevant, we share survey data from all Relate 918 OST program staff, which include responses from Youth at Heart staff and staff from other Relate 918 OST programs. 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 report here: *Early Lessons from Schools and*

*Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning* (www.rand.org/t/RRA379-1).

TABLE A.1

**Data We Drew on for the Case Study at Whitman and Youth at Heart**

<b>Data Category</b>	<b>Fall 2017</b>	<b>Spring 2018</b>	<b>Spring 2019</b>	<b>Fall 2019</b>	<b>Winter 2020</b>	<b>Spring 2020</b>	<b>Spring 2021</b>
Regular observations of instructional time	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	—
Extra observations (e.g., staff meetings, more classes)				*		*	*
Staff survey (school staff response rate)	✓ (77%)	✓ (85%)	✓ (82%)			✓ (71%)	✓ (70%)
Interviews of principal and OST program director	✓	✓	✓	✓ <sup>+</sup>		✓ <sup>+</sup>	✓ <sup>+</sup>
Interviews of teachers and OST program instructors	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓ <sup>+</sup>
Interviews of additional SEL roles (e.g., coaches, SEL leads)		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Interviews of noninstructional staff (e.g., cafeteria worker, secretary)				*		*	✘
Documents			✓			✓	✓
Administrative data from the school district	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

NOTES: The school-specific survey response rates are shown in parentheses. Blank cells mean that the data category was not part of the planned collection at the specified time point.

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

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

✓<sup>+</sup> = extended data collected at case study sites.

\* = collected at case study sites only and not at the other four Relate 918 campuses.



# ABBREVIATIONS

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<b>CASEL</b>	Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning
<b>COVID-19</b>	coronavirus disease 2019
<b>OST</b>	out-of-school-time
<b>OSTI</b>	out-of-school-time intermediary
<b>PSELI</b>	Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative
<b>RULER</b>	Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, Regulating
<b>SEL</b>	social and emotional learning

# ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “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.

<sup>2</sup> The three signature practices are warm welcome (a welcoming ritual to build community—e.g., greeting everyone warmly by name as they enter a classroom), engaging practices (interactive and reflective practices to help students engage in instruction—e.g., a one-minute “brain break”), and optimistic closure (a closing activity that highlights the importance of the work—e.g., each student shares something they learned today). Source: CASEL, “SEL 3 Signature Practices Playbook” webpage, undated. As of June 13, 2022: <https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/three-signature-sel-practices-for-adult-learning/>

<sup>3</sup> In 2016–2017, the year before Relate 918 began, Whitman’s teacher turnover rate was higher than any school in the district—47 percent of teachers did not return that school year (Andrea Eger and Curtis Killman, “Tulsa Public Schools Loses 35 Percent of Its Teachers in Two Years, But Many Aren’t Leaving for Higher Pay,” *Tulsa World*, March 4, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> CrimeGrade.org, “74106, OK Violent Crime Rates and Maps” webpage, undated. As of June 13, 2022: <https://crimegrade.org/violent-crime-74106/>

<sup>6</sup> Redlined neighborhoods are areas that the federal government color-coded as red on maps to indicate that the federal government would not insure home loans due to what they perceived as heightened risk of default. Many redlined neighborhoods were majority Black. The inability to secure home loans largely prohibited Black residents from buying and building wealth from their homes. Source: Camila Domonske, “Interactive Redlining Map Zooms in on America’s History of Discrimination,” NPR, October 19, 2016. As of June 12, 2022: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/10/19/498536077/interactive-redlining-map-zooms-in-on-americas-history-of-discrimination>

<sup>7</sup> *Adult wellness* is the process of adults practicing healthy habits to attain better social, mental, and physical health outcomes.

<sup>8</sup> The staff charter was similar to the RULER classroom charters used in Whitman classes in which students agreed on class norms and values to help establish a safe and welcoming environment.

<sup>9</sup> 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.



# ABOUT THIS REPORT

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## **RAND Education and Labor**

This case 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 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](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

More information about RAND can be found at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). Questions about this case study should be directed to Karen Christianson at [kchristi@rand.org](mailto:kchristi@rand.org), and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to [educationandlabor@rand.org](mailto:educationandlabor@rand.org).

**T**he Wallace Foundation’s Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative 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 (OST) programs partner to improve social and emotional learning (SEL), as well as what it takes to do this work.

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.” This case study explores how Whitman Elementary in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and its out-of-school-time program partner, Youth at Heart, learned to first invest in adults so that they are equipped to support students’ SEL.

In the 2020–2021 school year, a focus on consistent SEL practices as a way to support students, particularly those who had experienced trauma, resulted in students experiencing the same SEL resources, signature practices, and monthly SEL words across the school and OST day. School and OST program staff alike noticed improvements in both students’ social and emotional skills and behavior, as well as school climate. Students’ improved ability to express and regulate their own emotions corresponded with fewer fights, stronger relationships, and an improved climate. A switch to focusing on SEL practices, as opposed to SEL lesson plans, and reducing the number of SEL resources also helped teachers more consistently incorporate SEL.

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