



## EPISODE 3

# Building Effective Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning

### LUCAS HELD

Welcome to Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning, a new series of podcasts from The Wallace Foundation. I'm Lucas Held, director of communications at Wallace, and I'm delighted to have you join us today. This podcast series features conversations exploring the findings from the first two years of an initiative in which six communities are exploring whether and if so, how, children can benefit from intentional partnerships between schools and out-of-school time programs to build social and emotional skills and what it takes to actually do this work. This effort is called partnerships for social and emotional learning initiative or what we have affectionately come to call PSELI. The six communities in the initiative are Boston, Dallas, Denver, Palm Beach County, Florida, Tacoma, Washington, and Tulsa, Oklahoma. I want to thank our research partners at the RAND Corporation whose findings and early lessons we'll explore in depth over this series.

The first report, *Early Lessons from Schools and Out-of-School Time Programs Implementing Social and Emotional Learning*, is available without charge on the Wallace and Rand websites. We hope its findings will be useful, whether you're a district and out-of-school time provider, or a group of both collaborating, as well as to policymakers. Today's episode, we'll focus on the part of PSELI that is partnerships and how some of the communities in the initiative have worked to build these at both the system and the site level. And we're going to hear from two partnership pairs, one new and the other established that's still evolving.

So I'm delighted to welcome our guests. Stephanie Andrews, interim executive director of student and family support services at Tulsa public schools, Caroline Shaw, executive director of the Opportunity Project in Tulsa, Greg MacPherson, the chief Big Thought Institute officer at Big Thought in Dallas and Juany Valdespino-Gaytan, executive director of social-emotional learning at the Dallas Independent School District. So thank you all for joining us. The work that all of the PSELI communities are doing hinges on the idea of partnering and thoughtful, consistent ways to build SEL skills and deliver effective practices and programs in the school day and into the afterschool hours. Now we know that any partnership, no matter what kind, when they're effective, always includes

some challenges. And our PSEL communities also faced challenges when it came time to create those partnerships and sustain them, but they also work to develop successful strategies to overcome those challenges.

So we're going to explore two of these district and out-of-school time, intermediary partnerships today. And to provide a bit of context, the partnership between Tulsa public schools and the Opportunity Project, the out-of-school-time intermediary in Tulsa that is, is new. In fact, the Opportunity Project was created at the start of the PSEL initiative to coordinate the afterschool programs participating in the initiative. And in Tulsa, this work is called relate nine one eight. Now, in contrast in Dallas, the Dallas Independent School District and the local intermediary in that city called Big Thought have been working together for several years prior to creating SEL Dallas. Now RAND research has found that being committed to SEL and taking the time to meet were important starting points for partnerships between school districts and out-of-school time intermediaries. And of course we know that, uh, uh, in busy districts, uh, finding time to meet either in person or virtually, it can be a challenge. So Stephanie let's start with you, uh, from the vantage point of Tulsa public schools. Tell us about how you approach collaborating with the Opportunity Project, uh, when your partnership began.

**STEPHANIE ANDREWS**

Oh, we were so excited. Um, but we didn't actually know what we were doing. Um, I will, we didn't even know what an intermediary, just to be honest with you. I hadn't even really used the word before. Um, and so we were, um, just thrilled, we thought, okay, everybody's going to be so excited. We're going to get this partner and they're going to come work alongside this. And it ended up being pretty challenging in the fact that we have very different, like sort of working, um, mechanisms and thinkings between out-of-school time programming and in-school programming. So, um, but I would say that we dove right in and really, um, started meeting regularly. Um, I would think Caroline, you can jump in, but I, I believe it was like once a week we were meeting and we had all these planning committees and then we realized, um, we're going to have to do the things that you always do, build relationships among one another, build trust between the district and the intermediary. Um, I didn't really know the history of, um, maybe some challenges between like community-based organizations sort of working with the school district. We had always, you know, really had open arms, but it didn't always go that way with districts.

**LUCAS HELD**

So, Caroline, um, let, let's jump over to you. Um, Stephanie has really, uh, I think artfully described a kind of, uh, get acquainted moment, uh, was, was that, uh, your recollection as well?

**CAROLINE SHAW**

Absolutely. At the outset of the initiative, I think it was really about building trust and relationships. Um, and you know, what we have found since then is that everything does boil down to that. Um, ultimately, so I think, you know, it was also a combination of cultures, um, from two separate organizations, which is always going to be a little bit of a, of a challenge, but I think, um, you know, it really forced us to dig into our own adult SEL skill building, um, in order to make that work and to make all of the, you know, the partners who were around the table, again with their differing, um, organizational cultures and styles, um, to really figure out, you know, where was the commonality, um, and what could we, you know, what could we rally around? And I think, you know, one of the first things that, that we made a determination would be critical is having in-school and out-of-school participate in even the very initial, um, trainings together. Um, it, it didn't always work out exactly the way we thought it would work out based on timing and logistics at the, at the outset. Um, but that was one of those things that we realized pretty quickly was going to be critical, was to have that learning happen, um, in partnership between in school and out of school.

**LUCAS HELD**

So Greg, the partnership between Big Thought and the Dallas Independent School District is more than 20 years old, which is remarkable in itself. How did you establish expectations for this new initiative?

**GREG MACPHERSON**

Um, so Lucas you're correct. The, the relationship between, uh, Big Thought and Dallas ISD is longstanding and has covered many different initiatives, um, from school arts education-focused work to summer learning, uh, now to social emotional learning. And so, um, there was already a, a good deal of trust capital built between the partnership. We had a lot of that, um, sort of relational infrastructure already in place, um, that we were able to call on to begin that now the sort of the tactics we take from there, uh, lots of meetings and conversations, um, sort of summarizing minutes, uh, coming out of that to make sure that everybody was hearing and agreeing to the same things. Um, but the, the relationships were in place that we could very much, um, lean on, uh, in those, those early days.

**LUCAS HELD**

Uh, so let's turn to Juany Valdespino-Gaytan and Juany is executive director of social, emotional learning at the Dallas Independent School District, which is a very, very large district. So, uh, Juany, from your perspective, how, how have you dealt with, uh, differences in approaches and in regards to trust capital, what does it mean that in a sense the, the, the bigger fish in the pond, not to be crude about it, is DISD and, and Big Thought is a small, but mighty. How do you deal with, uh, differences?

**JUANY VALDESPINO-GAYTAN**

Yeah, I think that Greg hit it right on the nail it's communication. Um, you know, I think it's important that, uh, that we do have that open communication and that we can turn to each other. If we see that we might have, um, a conflict with the plan, then we just reach out to each other. And that's the great thing about having this, um, this relationship and just really trusting each other, that we can feel comfortable enough to go to each other. Not that every conversation is comfortable depending on the situation, but that we, that we are transparent with each other enough to share when there is a challenge, um, that we need to address. But ultimately, I think that what helps us is that we're both focused on serving our students. We want what's best for our students. We have the end goal in mind, and it's not about each organization when we're working together. It's about how do we work together so that we can serve our students though. Dallas ISD is a huge organization. We can't do this alone. When we started this work as a district, we leaned on Big Thought because they had already started implementing social, emotional learning in the after-school programs. So we were learning from them just as much as you know, we were learning from this, um, from this new effort around, social-emotional learning.

**LUCAS HELD**

A wonderful description of the recognition of a mutual interdependency and a mutual respect. One of the early lessons noted by RAND was the importance of developing a common language about SEL as a way to build and promote a shared understanding. So maybe Stephanie, over to you, what, uh, what do you think RAND was referring to when it talked about a common language?

**STEPHANIE ANDREWS**

Well, I think that we began, of course with CASEL's initial language, right around social, emotional learning, and we all together worked on the same trainings, but in our relate nine one eight work, what became really important was actually using a curriculum, um, that was both in school

and out of school. And I think we were one of the early ones to jump right in. And we started using, um, RULER from Yale, um, their social, emotional learning, um, curriculum and in our in-school and out-of-school, and that helped us to then have the same language around social, emotional learning. And that's where we even got this idea of starting with adults. Um, that particular program says that social, emotional learning, we should spend our initial stages in sort of norming for adults and how we work together, um, as a team, which helped our, not only our district team to work on those skills, but also worked with school teams.

**LUCAS HELD**

So, Caroline, do you think as Stephanie noted that actually having that same, uh, curricular structure as a basis helped in the partnership?

**CAROLINE SHAW**

Absolutely. Yeah. It, it most certainly did. Um, not only did it give us a common framework for both in school and out of school, but again, provided that opportunity for, you know, training, um, not just in parallel, but actually together. Um, and in addition to that, I think it also provided each organization. Um, so our partners in the out-of-school time space in school teams, our core team across the district and the Opportunity Project, um, the chance to utilize the tools in our own work and in our own meetings and in our own interactions and dealings with one another. So it really gave us a little bit of a sandbox or an opportunity to not only understand the curriculum, but to be better prepared to support partners, um, in the implementation of that curriculum. So I think RULER was a great place for us to start.

**LUCAS HELD**

Speaking of opportunities. I want to, uh, ask both of you about what you see as, uh, we talked a little bit about the fact that it takes work. Partnerships always take work. I'd like to ask both of you about what you see as the benefits for children and adults, uh, in the community. And I asked both of you about, uh, overcoming some, uh, challenges. So why should, or why would district and an out-of-school time intermediary, everyone want, think about, uh, undertaking a partnership?

**STEPHANIE ANDREWS**

Oh, the benefits are, um, like outweigh any sort of challenges I'll say that upfront. Um, and that's because we don't just live in this little microcosm called a school district, right? Our students go home every day and live in the community. So it only makes sense that we would be reaching out to our community based organizations, our partners, our expanded learning partners, um, for us all, to work together, to serve our students

and families. So, um, the benefits especially weigh heavily. When you think about specifically speaking of RULER, one of my favorite things is that if a student is hearing some of those things during the school or out checking in with your mood or understanding how your feelings are and using like really rich emotional vocabulary, and then an expanded learning partner uses that. And then a family uses that.

Can you imagine, like how it's all reinforced for this student, um, to really have emotional health? So, um, the benefit is, is overwhelmingly amazing for students, but I also think it really enriches, um, the adults who are working in both settings as well. Like I said, I didn't even know the word intermediary when we started this project. And there are so many amazing partners that we have in Tulsa that I had never worked with, didn't know the work that they did. And really, I think at times, um, when I've been a classroom teacher, I've worked for our school district for over 20 years. And I think there were times I thought I was all alone as a classroom teacher, um, that I had this responsibility for this student all by myself. And so it's been amazing to be like, I'm not, first of all, teachers, aren't alone in this, the whole city is involved in helping support students and families. And there's so many things we can learn from our expanded learning partners.

#### **LUCAS HELD**

So you're seeing some benefits in that alignment. Uh, and it also, uh, and Greg, I wonder from your perspective also, um, partnerships are, you know, require some investment. What, what, what do you see as the benefits for children from these?

#### **GREG MACPHERSON**

Yeah, I think the benefits are many for both the children that, um, we get to work with and serve as well as the adults. I think the alignment is a huge piece. Um, but I think that what we've also learned is that, um, there's a diversity of thought that comes when we bring our teams together that has really challenged the work to, to move forward, um, and to grow. And, and that might not happen if, if we were all working in our own silos and just making decisions, um, separate from, from everyone else, the alignment would be off, but I don't think that the work would be as rich either. Um, and, and I think that has definitely, um, been part of the benefit to the entire system, um, at the campus and at the district level. Um, I think the other thing is just our very act of collaboration is way in which we can model and practice many of these social and emotional learning skills that we're asking the adults at campuses to, um, implement and practice as well as what we're trying to

teach our youth. And so it's an opportunity to model that and that be a part of the leadership at all levels. Um, and in every way that you think about that.

**LUCAS HELD**

So let's talk a bit about the challenges, uh, RAND did point to the challenge of, uh, uh, of these partnerships. And one they highlighted was the overcoming of a perceived and actual power differential between schools and out-of-school time, uh, programs. And in RAND's words, I'll quote, taking the time to meet, increasing the overlap of school in OST staff, and explicitly acknowledging the power differential that favors schools over OST programs are important ingredients for strong school-OST partnerships. Stephanie let's, let's start with you, is this power differential real. And, and how have you thought about handling it?

**STEPHANIE ANDREWS**

I can see that when we first started the initiative, I think I was naive perhaps to this differential, um, having, you know, like I said, worked in Tulsa Public Schools, my entire career. I've always like with open arms welcomed all of our organizations that could help me. I was always the one anyone that could support us, um, with students. I was all in. However, I will say that it is actually true. The district is much bigger and we have a way of doing things and I didn't realize there's actually been a lot of harm, um, that non-intentional harm. But, um, with working with our outside partners where, um, we've just made decisions and excluded them and not even considered them in many of our decision-making, um, processes.

So I would say that that actually is true, but at the beginning of the initiative, I don't think that I didn't, um, like denied it. I just hadn't had any experience with it just personally. And so one of the things we did really have to work about is really professional, like treating our youth care workers as professionals. Um, I didn't realize that there was this thing around like a certified classroom teacher versus a professional youth care worker. Um, and so there, it was, it's been a big learning experience for me, um, in this project, but I think it's well worth it in recognizing that both sets of individuals have such great things to bring to students and families that we need to learn from both of them.

**LUCAS HELD**

So, Caroline, um, Stephanie brought up, um, both the kind of barrier of different procedures and also, uh, what sounds to me like, uh, to quote

Aretha Franklin. R-E-S-P-E-C-T, uh, you know, treat, treating people as, uh, as professionals does this resonate with you?

## **CAROLINE SHAW**

It does. And I think we were prepared to, to work on building relationships at the outset of the initiative, but probably not fully aware of what that, that power differential, that power dynamic, um, would, you know, the challenges, um, that it would lead to. So I think, I mean, there are three things that I feel like we, you know, once we realized, um, you know, the depth of that three things that we said, okay, here's what we can do and really be proactive about solving this.

So one is, um, communicating the value of out-of-school time and expanded learning and why it's so important. For those of us who are steeped in this work, it seems intuitive but it was really important for us to help classroom educators and school teams understand the why behind, um, the importance of kids being able to direct their own learning, find something that, um, again, you know, sparks their passion, um, and really help them understand that, that there was data behind that as well. There was a reason why we're doing this. I think that was the first thing.

Um, the second thing was really working with, um, our both in school and out-of-school time folks to help them, um, understand that we were thinking about young people as whole people, uh, not necessarily just academic beings and students. And so some of that was as simple as changing, um, changing our vocabulary. So instead of always referring to youth in our, in our initiative, as students thinking about them as young people or youth, um, and thinking about them again as, as whole human beings. Um, so some things like those were really simple, simple tasks. Um, one thing that was, you know, more complicated and we're continuing to work through this is building up the confidence of youth workers and the folks who are participating in out-of-school time work to feel, um, confident and to feel prepared, to have, um, both hard conversations and, and just normal sort of everyday logistics conversations with their in-school counterparts. Um, so helping them understand that they have a place at the table and helping them to, um, you know, to be coached around how to use their voice and that way.

And I think the third thing that really has made a difference is, um, not every partner had staff who was either, um, prepared or, um, frankly even at a full-time, um, full-time employment capacity to be embedded in the school during the school day. And so that is something that we have

worked really hard to make sure that our partners are able to do, and we want to support them in that cause that has made a huge difference to have a dedicated OST, uh, team member in the building with an office and a space and a contribution to the school community throughout the day and into the out-of-school time space. Um, so that's something that we have really found has been a key, um, element for our success. So we're going to continue to work to, to push toward that model.

**LUCAS HELD**

Let's close by asking you, Caroline, and then Stephanie what bits of advice would you give other communities who like what they see and, and thinking of doing something similar?

**CAROLINE SHAW**

Yeah, there, I mean, there are so many, so many things that come to mind, but I would say the number one most important thing is to start with relationships. Um, and I think that that's from the top down and from the bottom up. So you want to make sure that you are engaging, um, you know, as an intermediary, we want to make sure that we're engaging with the school district at all levels and in all departments. Um, so that doesn't mean that you are only focusing on the conversations that you're having with one particular department that may be germane to, um, expand and learning or, um, out of school time. But that instead, what you're thinking about is really how do you develop relationships across the district that allow you to be able to, um, not only get a question answered when you need it answered, but also allow for the fact that there's mobility within districts as well.

The other thing I would say is just communicate, communicate, communicate. So as much as you can, if you have bright spots, highlights, anecdotes, pictures, um, good news, good things that are happening, make sure you're telling that story, uh, because it's very easy for all of us to get kind of mired in our day to day, um, and, and not look up and see those things.

**LUCAS HELD**

So thank you, Stephanie, what advice would you have for your colleagues?

**STEPHANIE ANDREWS**

I would say that the biggest piece of advice and Caroline, I agree with everything you said, is really around not only having relationships, but really formalizing the partnership. I think that when I think about my career in education, I've always, like I said, I had great relationships, but it wasn't very organized. Uh, you know, I had to call multiple people and

of course they were willing to help, but, um, it was a little fragmented. And so I would say that definitely, you know, get a formal partnership with, um, community-based organizations have standing meetings with them, you know, really get to know the agency and the other connections they may have. I would say that that is really important if you, especially, if you don't have an intermediary, that would be one of the biggest pieces of advice I would have.

**JUANY VALDESPINO-GAYTAN**

Yeah. I think, I think it's important that both organizations really build that relationship and that they get to know each other and what each organization offers, what they're, you know, for a district to learn. What programs are offered within the district? What, what the structure, what the org structure is just really get to become familiar with the organization for the after-school provider, learn what, um, what services they provide and then identify that shared interest or that, um, where both organizations align. I think the more you get to spend time together at the front end, you'll learn early on where each organization compliments the other and how you can help each other in, um, meeting its goals. And I think that that's something I, I really feel that what we, um, have experienced most out of this partnership is that this isn't just the district driving this, um, this plan. This is really a joint effort from the inception onwards.

**LUCAS HELD**

Thank you, Juany. How about you, Greg? What, what advice for other cities?

**GREG MACPHERSON**

I agree wholeheartedly with Juany, I think it's about the relationship. I think, um, being able to establish what your shared, um, as when he said interests were, what's that goal that you both align around, um, uh, goal objective, however you want to frame it. And then I think a lot of listening, um, it's being able to create the space and the time and really listen. Cause that's where you get to a common understanding around those things. If you just lead with what you need or want to get out of this, you're not going to, um, establish, uh, you know, the kind of foundation you need for long-term partnerships. So, um, starting with listening is probably the best advice I can give in time, allow time for it, because it can't always be manufactured quickly and overnight.

**LUCAS HELD**

Listening and time. What a great way to close out our conversation. Thank you.

