

Preparing for Effective SEL Implementation

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This brief is part of a series commissioned by the Wallace Foundation that draws upon Navigating Social and Emotional Learning from the Inside Out, a resource developed by our team to analyze widely-used SEL programs and provide comprehensive details, transparent information, and cross-program analyses about the various in-school and out-of-school-time programs that are currently available in US contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Preschool- and school-based programming in SEL has been linked to a variety of outcomes both in the short- and long-term.^{1,2,3,4} However, despite the many positive outcomes associated with SEL (e.g., academic achievement, physical and emotional wellbeing, etc.), it is not uncommon for schools and organizations to see less powerful results than expected based on prior evidence. Research suggests that this issue may be due in part to inconsistent or ineffective implementation practices.^{5,6}

A growing body of research emphasizes the importance of effective implementation.⁷ One large-scale review of prevention programs found that in more than 500 studies, implementation practices had an important impact on program outcomes.⁸ Research also indicates that high-quality implementation is positively associated with better student outcomes.⁹ Moreover, disorganized approaches to SEL programming have been shown to have negative effects on staff morale and student engagement,¹⁰ and therefore may risk doing more harm than good.

Even among the highest-quality, evidence-based approaches to SEL, implementation plays a critical role in shaping outcomes. Fortunately, research and practice have illuminated important findings about the conditions needed for effective implementation. As described in greater detail below, effective program implementation necessitates careful planning and the selection of programs or strategies that meet the needs of a particular context. Our recent analysis of 25 high-quality SEL programs reveals that SEL programs vary greatly in their content focus, instructional methods, and additional features and supports beyond core lessons. It is important to consider how these key features and components (see box to the right) may support high-quality implementation given the needs and goals of

COMMON COMPONENTS OF SEL PROGRAMS

Supplementary Lessons/Activities

Activities to be used in addition to, or in conjunction with, the core curriculum. Includes activities that integrate SEL skills and practices into the academic curriculum.

Climate & Culture Supports

Features that promote positive norms and expectations and that help students/staff feel safe, connected, and engaged.

Applications to OST

Features designed to be used in, or adapted for, OST settings.

Adaptability to Local Context

Features that help staff tailor the program to site-, classroom-, or student-specific needs.

Professional Development & Training

Opportunities for professional development and training, including support for adult social-emotional competence.

Support for Implementation

Resources to help school staff facilitate classroom or school-wide implementation.

Tools to Assess Program Outcomes

Tools to evaluate student/teacher progress and program effectiveness.

Tools to Assess Implementation

Tools to evaluate fidelity of implementation and staff buy-in.

Family Engagement

Activities/events that incorporate families.

Community Engagement

Activities/events that build connections between students and their community.

a particular context.ⁱ

This brief begins by describing what we know about the features of effective SEL programming and provides a set of recommendations for effective implementation. In addition, we highlight how specific program components may serve as supports for best practices or to address common challenges. The brief concludes with recommendations for how to use our recent report, *Navigating Social and Emotional Learning from the Inside Out*, to identify implementation needs as well as the programs or programmatic features best suited to address them.

COMMON FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

Research indicates that the most effective SEL programs incorporate four elements represented by the acronym SAFE: (1) **sequenced** activities that lead in a coordinated and connected way to skill development, (2) **active** forms of learning that enable children to practice and master new skills, (3) **focused** time spent developing one or more social and emotional skills, and (4) **explicit** defining and targeting of specific skills.¹¹ But SEL is about more than just targeting and building skills, and our own research^{12,13,14} builds upon on the SAFE elements to add that SEL efforts are most successful when they also:

1. **Occur within supportive contexts.**

School and classroom contexts that are supportive of children’s social and emotional development include (a) adult and child practices and activities that build skills and establish prosocial norms; and (b) a climate that actively promotes healthy relationships, instructional support, and positive classroom management. For this reason, efforts to build social and emotional skills and to improve school culture and climate are mutually reinforcing and may enhance benefits when the two are pursued in a simultaneous and coordinated fashion.

2. **Build adult competencies.**

This includes promoting teachers’ own social and emotional competence and supporting the ongoing integration of SEL-informed pedagogical skills into everyday practice.

3. **Partner with family and community.**

This includes taking into consideration the environments and contexts in which children learn, live, and grow by building family-school-community partnerships that can support children at home and in other out-of-school settings, fostering culturally competent and responsive practices, and considering how specific educational policies may influence children.

4. **Target key behaviors and skills.**

This includes targeting, in a developmentally appropriate way, skills across multiple domains of development, including: (a) emotional processes, (b) social/interpersonal skills, and (c) cognitive regulation or executive function skills.

5. **Set reasonable goals.**

This includes articulating a series of short- and long-term outcomes that are reasonable goals or expectations for the specific SEL effort. These include (a) short-term indicators of children’s growth and progress in areas proximal to the specific SEL activities, and (b) longer-term indicators of more distal, future impacts.

ⁱ For a detailed description of our methodology, including the program selection criteria and coding/data collection system, please see Appendices B and C, respectively of our full report, *Navigating SEL from the Inside Out: Looking Inside and Across 25 Leading SEL Programs*.

The following chart shows which of the components commonly offered in SEL programs help support each of the features listed above:

Figure 1. Matching Program Features to Components

WHICH PROGRAM COMPONENTS HELP FACILITATE BEST PRACTICES?	
Key Features	Relevant Program Componentsⁱⁱ
Occurs within supportive contexts.	Climate/Culture Supports
Builds adult competencies.	Climate/Culture Supports PD/Training
Acknowledges features of the broader community context.	Adaptability to Local Context Family Engagement Community Engagement
Targets a key set of skills across multiple domains of development.	Core Curriculum/Lessons Supplementary Lessons
Sets reasonable goals.	Support for Implementation Tools to Assess Student Outcomes

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

As mentioned above, the success of SEL programming relies on more than just putting in place a strong, evidence-based curriculum – the curriculum needs to be implemented well. A growing body of research highlights the conditions needed for effective implementation. Based on this research and our collective experience, we outline a set of recommendations for effective implementation:

1. **Allot the time required to implement the program sufficiently and effectively.**

SEL programs often take the form of short lessons, implemented during a weekly half-hour or hour-long section of a language arts, social studies, or other class.¹⁵ However, lessons and other program activities are often abridged or skipped due to tight schedules and competing priorities such as academic content. In other cases, schools adopt programs without setting aside time in the daily schedule, leaving it to teachers to find extra time or adapt the curricula so that it fits appropriately into the day. To address these issues, a growing number of schools and organizations have made efforts to integrate SEL skills with academic content (e.g., using history, language arts, and social studies curricula to build cultural sensitivity,

ⁱⁱ Drawn from ‘Common Components of SEL Programs’ displayed on the first page of this brief; please refer to this list for definitions.

respect for diversity, and social/ethical awareness).^{16,17} Many programs offer suggestions for integration or even specific activities that align with academic content. Throughout the planning and implementation process, it is important for schools and organizations to consider how programs or programmatic features will support effective implementation and align with the structures and routines already in place in the setting.

2. Extend SEL beyond the classroom.

Most SEL programs focus primarily on what goes on in the classroom, but SEL skills are also needed on playgrounds, in lunchrooms, in hallways and bathrooms, and in the time spent in out-of-school settings—in short, everywhere. Student surveys and “hot-spot mapping,” in which students draw maps of the areas in school where they feel unsafe, show that students feel most unsafe in these un-monitored, and sometimes unstructured, zones.^{18,19} Students need support to navigate these spaces and make the entire school environment one that is safe, positive, and conducive to learning. These non-classroom contexts provide vital opportunities for students to practice SEL skills. When selecting a program or strategies and planning for implementation, schools and organizations should be intentional about providing continuous, consistent opportunities to build and practice these skills across settings, including through connections at home and in the community.²⁰

3. Apply SEL strategies and skills in real-time.

Even with comprehensive curricula, teachers and other school and out-of-school-time (OST) staff often struggle to use program strategies in real-time “teachable moment” situations or to help students transfer and apply these skills more broadly to their daily interactions in the classroom and other settings (e.g., playground, hallway, lunchroom, etc.).^{21,22} Students are most likely to benefit from SEL when they have opportunities to use and practice skills in everyday interactions and routines.²³ For example, a teacher might scaffold students to use specific conflict resolution skills during a disagreement on the playground. Some programs are designed around using strategies in real-time, while others provide support for integrating SEL into regular classroom practice and program/school culture (e.g., support staff trainings, SEL-based behavior management and instructional strategies, etc.).

4. Ensure sufficient staff support and training.

Broadly speaking, teachers, school staff, and other adults who work with children typically receive little training in how to promote SEL skills, deal with peer conflict, or address other SEL-related issues.^{24,25} For example, pre-service teacher training includes little attention to these issues beyond basic behavior management strategies. Likewise, little in-service support is available on these topics, particularly through effective approaches like coaching and mentoring. In addition, research shows that an adult’s own SEL skills play an important role in their ability to model those skills, develop positive relationships with students, and foster positive classroom environments conducive to learning.²⁶ For SEL to be effective, adults need support both in pre-service training and in their ongoing work. Look for SEL programs or other opportunities that provide training or professional development for staff to build knowledge and develop their own social-emotional competence.

5. Facilitate program ownership and buy-in.

School administrators and staff sometimes perceive structured programs to be too “top-down,” and as a result, staff lack a sense of ownership and trust. In other cases, schools do not view programs as sensitive to their local context and therefore make modifications. When making decisions about SEL programming, it is important to include staff and other key stakeholders. In addition, schools and organizations should select programming that is developmentally and culturally aligned to the needs of their students.

6. **Use data to inform decision-making.**

Despite the general trend toward data-driven decision-making in schools, few schools employ data to guide decision-making about the selection, implementation, or ongoing assessment of the programs and strategies they use. It can thus be difficult for schools and organizations to select and use programs that are most suited to their contexts and to the specific challenges they are facing, as well as to monitor results and hold themselves accountable. In many cases, schools and organizations can use relatively simple tools or data that are already collected, such as school climate surveys or behavior referrals, to identify their needs and make decisions about programming, as well as to monitor implementation and results.

The table below highlights common programmatic components that support effective implementation.

Figure 2. Matching Implementation Recommendations to Components

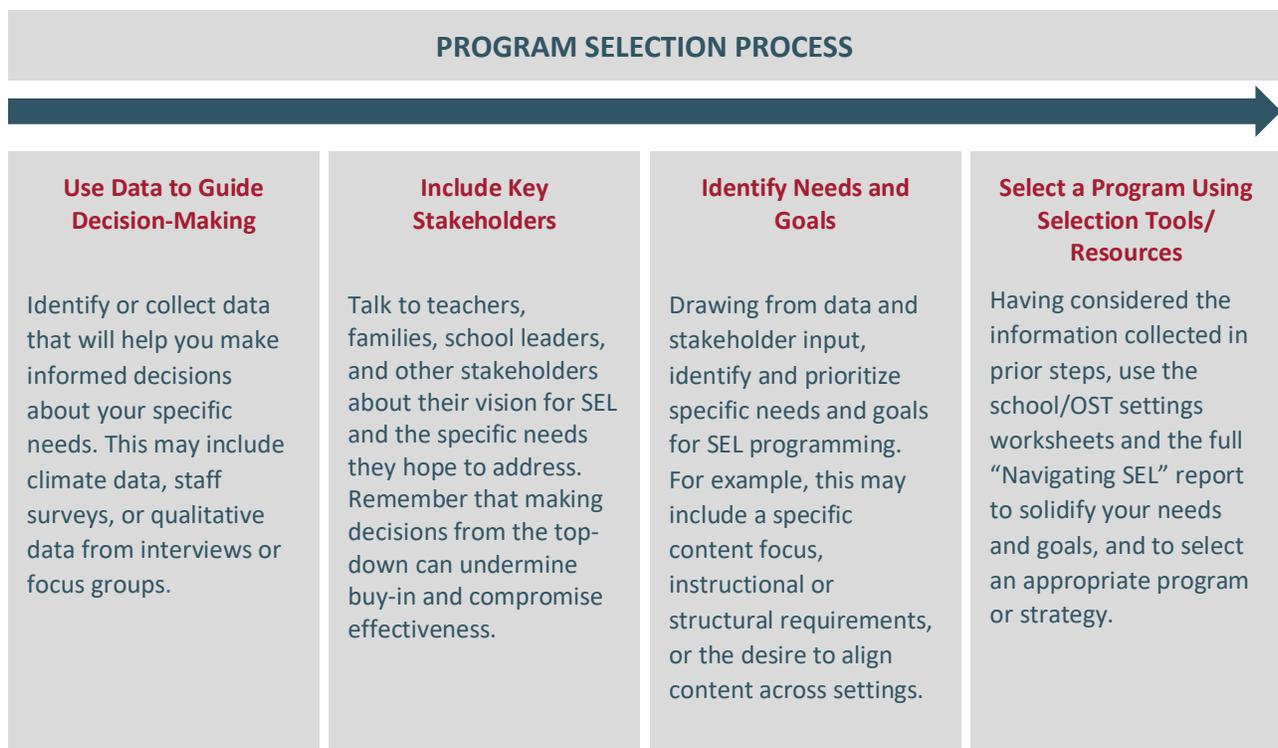
WHICH PROGRAM COMPONENTS ADDRESS KEY IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS?	
Key Features	Relevant Program Componentsⁱⁱⁱ
Find time to implement the program sufficiently and effectively.	Support for Implementation Supplementary Lessons/Activities Adaptability to Local Context
Extend SEL beyond the classroom.	Climate/Culture Supports PD/Training
Apply SEL skills and strategies in real-time.	Classroom Activities Beyond Core Lessons Climate/Culture Supports
Ensure sufficient staff support and training.	PD/Training Support for Implementation
Facilitate program ownership and buy-in.	Support for Implementation Tools to Assess Implementation Adaptability to Local Context
Using data to inform decision-making.	Tools to Assess Student Outcomes Tools to Assess Implementation Support for Implementation

ⁱⁱⁱ Drawn from ‘Common Components of SEL Programs’ displayed on the first page of this brief; please refer to this list for definitions.

PROGRAM SELECTION

We recommend that schools and OST organizations begin by discussing the common features and recommendations listed above. With these in mind, schools and organizations can begin to review and select the program, program components, and/or strategies that best fit the specific needs of their context. This includes thinking about the programs and programmatic features that support effective implementation.

SEL efforts should also take into consideration aspects of the broader environment in which children live and learn, engaging families and communities and ensuring cultural sensitivity and responsiveness.^{27,28} To facilitate this process, we suggest referencing our recent report, [Navigating Social and Emotional Learning from the Inside Out](#), which provides comprehensive details about leading evidence-based SEL programs as well as worksheets developed to guide the program selection process. The diagram below illustrates a process that may be helpful in using these resources to make informed decisions.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

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THE FULL REPORT:

Navigating Social and Emotional Learning from the Inside Out

Looking Inside and Across 25 Leading SEL Programs

Commissioned by the Wallace Foundation and prepared by researchers at the EASEL Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Navigating Social and Emotional Learning from the Inside Out is an in-depth guide to 25 evidence-based programs—aimed at elementary schools and OST providers—offers information about curricular content and programmatic features that practitioners can use to make informed choices about their SEL programs. The first of its kind, the guide allows practitioners to compare curricula and methods across top SEL programs. It also explains how programs can be adapted from schools to out-of-school-time settings, such as afterschool and summer programs.

Building upon existing tools in the field, the guide offers a practical, consumer-oriented resource that provides profiles of each program, including the specific skills targeted and instructional methods used. Some programs, for example, are designed to help students regulate their behavior, while others are aimed at developing certain mindsets or character traits.

About the EASEL Lab

The Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory, led by Dr. Stephanie Jones of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, explores the effects of high-quality social-emotional interventions on the development and achievement of children, youth, teachers, parents, and communities. Our projects aim to advance the field of social and emotional learning through research, practice, and policy. The EASEL Lab also affects change through its translational projects, which work to strengthen the links between the growing body of evidence supporting high-quality SEL and the creation and application of education policy and practice more generally.

About the Wallace Foundation

The Wallace Foundation's mission is to foster improvements in learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children and the vitality of the arts for everyone. Our approach to accomplishing our mission emerges from the idea that foundations have a unique but often untapped capacity to develop evidence and experiences that can help advance an entire field. Wallace currently has initiatives in seven areas: afterschool, arts education, building audiences for the arts, social and emotional learning, expanded learning, school leadership and summer learning.

