



LESSONS FROM THE PARTNERSHIPS FOR
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INITIATIVE

VOLUME 2, PART 3

Building an Effective Social and Emotional Learning Committee in Dallas

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

ALICE HUGUET, HEATHER L. SCHWARTZ, CATHERINE H. AUGUSTINE



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HOW ONE DALLAS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME PROGRAM FORMED A COMMITTEE THAT BECAME MORE EFFECTIVE OVER TIME, FOCUSING ON DAILY ACTIVITIES TO MAKE SEL STICK

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.

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.”¹

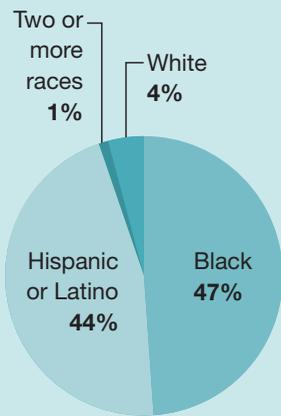
The six school–OST program partnerships that we feature belong to 76 total school–OST program partnerships involved in the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI). Half of the 76 partnerships started their SEL work in 2017–2018, and the other half could choose to start their 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.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

Webster Demographics as of 2017–2018

Percentage of students by race/ethnicity



76%

Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch



36%

Percentage of students with limited English proficiency

This case study focuses on the work of Webster Elementary School and their out-of-school-time (OST) partner, Thriving Minds After School (TMAS), over the four-year period of 2017–2018 to 2020–2021. Located in southwestern Dallas, Webster Elementary enrolls around 300 students, most of whom are Black or Hispanic or Latino. The majority are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

In a typical year during the case study period, TMAS served about one-third of the student body at Webster.² TMAS offers students performing arts opportunities—such as drama and music—and helps them with their schoolwork. TMAS also focuses on SEL instruction and play. Its programming primarily takes place after school in Webster’s cafeteria, outdoor spaces, and designated classrooms. The partnership between Webster and TMAS predates this case study.

Webster and TMAS are one of seven school and OST program partnerships in Dallas selected to receive intensive SEL supports during the first four years of the Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI), locally called SEL Dallas. SEL Dallas provided SEL coaching to TMAS and Webster during the period of this case study, as well as guidance and training about SEL, SEL instruction, and using SEL committees to structure their SEL work. See the “About the SEL Case Studies” section on the first page and the appendix for more information about PSELI.

School leaders at Webster were already interested in SEL by the time they partnered with SEL Dallas. They initially signed up to participate in the initiative because they felt that student fights and other behavioral disruptions were too common and that students needed more and better emotional supports. Although SEL is not a behavior management system, the Webster team surmised that they could support students better if they taught them approaches to be more mindful and

to manage stress appropriately, while also building more-positive relationships with adults and peers on campus.

The SEL steering committee at Webster became the driving force behind Webster’s SEL work. The committee selected and created SEL activities to prioritize on campus, led SEL training for staff, and monitored implementation. The steering committee included Webster’s principal; Webster’s counselor, who served as an SEL champion on campus; three Webster teachers; a coach from the Dallas Independent School District (called the SEL coordinator); and the TMAS OST SEL specialist.³

This case study describes the evolution of the committee over the course of four years, which is shown in Figure 1. The case study focuses on ways that the committee strategized to engage all instructors in SEL and to make SEL practices across the campus sustainable, even if Webster experienced staff turnover or faced other challenges. In so doing, we highlight the strategies that they applied to support their vision, lessons learned, and the outcomes of their work.

This case also addresses how SEL helped Webster during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. COVID-19 restrictions tested some of the strategies that the committee had put in place and forced staff to adapt SEL for the new environment. Yet the pandemic also revealed that staff had embraced SEL and that SEL helped staff and students alike. 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 it for this report.

FIGURE 1
Timeline of the SEL Committee’s Work



COMPLEMENTARY SKILLS—NOT JUST RAPPORT—HELPED MAKE THE SEL STEERING COMMITTEE EFFECTIVE

Although committee members at Webster had excellent interpersonal relationships, partnerships that rely on rapport among individuals can be precarious, because staff turnover can change the group dynamic. Instead, the committee members highlighted in our interviews how their complementary skills enabled them to effectively drive SEL implementation across campus. Namely, the school staff and the TMAS SEL specialist who were part of the committee collectively contributed data analysis skills, logistics experience, SEL content knowledge, and on-the-ground perspectives about SEL practice in classroom and OST activities.

Lesson Learned

SEL committee members' varied strengths—such as teaching, data use, and school-OST relations—helped make them an effective group to drive SEL implementation at the campus.

The principal brought a focus on logistics—e.g., *If we adopt policy X, how exactly will that work, and who will do what?*—and data use expertise, leading the committee to monitor and adjust SEL practices along the way. Classroom teachers on the committee reported frontline workers' perspectives on what was realistic for the classroom, and the counselor monitored and reported back to the team about schoolwide implementation. The school district's SEL coach provided SEL content knowledge and brought in information from the initiative at large, also taking Webster information back to the district. The SEL specialist represented OST instructors' perspectives and provided expertise about what the school and OST instructors could do in tandem. Also, as a full-time staff member who was not a frontline instructor, the SEL specialist worked at the school for much of the day, which allowed her to work directly with both teachers and OST program instructors, model new SEL activities in both school and OST

program classes, and attend the SEL committee meetings when they occurred during afterschool program hours. (Note that OST frontline staff were not able to attend the committee meetings because they occurred during OST program hours—a common issue for the SEL committees in PSELI.) Assembling a SEL committee with the range of skills and knowledge that Webster possessed—as opposed to relying on individuals with particular relationships that are lost when those individuals leave—may help sustain the work of a team over time.

We note that an additional ingredient of the committee’s success was that it included leaders with the authority to set strategy for the school and TMAS programs. These leaders were exceptionally enthusiastic about SEL. The district SEL coach—a system-level member of the committee with a big-picture understanding of the initiative—stated that the Webster team was particularly strong because of its dedication to action: “There’s plenty of ideas in education. We need action-oriented people that are going to do the work.”

THE STEERING COMMITTEE BECAME MORE EFFECTIVE OVER TIME AS IT ADDED STRUCTURE TO ITS MEETINGS

The work of a committee—even one with Webster’s complementary skills—can be fleeting when funded by a time-limited grant, such as those awarded as part of PSELI. This was a topic that the Webster team discussed; as a steering committee member told us, “We need to be mindful of whatever we do: Is it going to be sustainable when the grant is over?”

To help ensure that Webster’s SEL practices would persist, the committee began enacting intentional strategies designed to embed SEL in the broader school and OST context. As we describe below, these strategies included the use of short SEL rituals (such as warm welcomes), shared language, and a campus-wide “house system.”

Lesson Learned

As the steering committee adopted a more routinized approach—incorporating frequent meetings, recordkeeping and meeting guides, and activities that helped members get to know one another—they began to have more meaningful conversations about how SEL could best serve their community and be sustained over time.

The committee members started by formalizing their own interactions. When the committee first formed in fall 2017, committee members had conversations as needed but no formal meetings. By spring 2018, they found that they had enough agenda items to warrant a weekly meeting. (Other SEL Dallas committees typically met monthly.) Frequent meetings allowed the committee to check in often and maintain SEL at the top of campus-wide priorities.

The committee added more structure in 2019–2020 to its meeting agendas to enable better, deeper conversation about their SEL work. For example, the committee adopted a tool provided by the SEL Dallas system leads called the “SEL Dallas Roadmap.”⁴ This tool organized their recurring agenda around topics of explicit SEL skills instruction, integration of SEL on campus, and campus climate.⁵ They also maintained an up-to-date SEL binder that contained information about how the SEL steering committee meetings were run, SEL guidance documents that it had provided to school and OST program staff, and SEL-relevant data. They distributed copies of the binder to all teachers, office staff, and OST instructors. One element of the binder was a staff primer, which included descriptions of organizations involved with SEL Dallas, the SEL Dallas vision and mission, a list of Webster-specific SEL terminology, descriptions of SEL practices expected of all staff, schedules of SEL-related campus activities, and biographies of each steering committee member. The binder was used for onboarding new staff at Webster, serving a purpose that benefited the full campus and addressed the challenge of staff turnover. This type of documentation can help sustain organizational efforts like implementing SEL over time.

Committee members’ dialogues about SEL became increasingly sophisticated over time. In the first year of meetings, the committee members discussed SEL in relatively narrow terms. For example, as one member put it in spring 2018, they tended to ask one another questions such as “What do you need?” and “Is there anything coming up I need to know about?”

A little over a year later, in fall 2019, the team was discussing more-complex and sensitive topics in their meetings, such as the relationship between racial bias and SEL and how they saw it play out on their campus. By the 2020–2021 school year, the committee was able to apply their grasp of SEL, cumulative knowledge of what they had done in the past, and an understanding of their Webster community to address unfamiliar topics, such as how to best serve students, families, and teachers dealing with the collective trauma of the pandemic.

Likewise, the committee added explicit considerations of the equity implications of SEL work on the campus to its SEL oversight. For example, when thinking about campus climate, the Webster SEL team considered how their decisions would contribute to a culturally affirming environment for all students and staff. They discussed ways that they could affirm Black and Hispanic or Latino cultures as well as students' home languages and also considered gender equity and the needs of special education students when making decisions.

WITH SUSTAINABILITY IN MIND, THE COMMITTEE CHOSE STRATEGIES TO CULTIVATE A SEL-FOCUSED CLIMATE ACROSS CAMPUS

The SEL committee prioritized particular SEL strategies; below, we describe three of these that were commonly discussed in interviews: (1) short SEL rituals, (2) shared SEL language across the school and OST program, and (3) a house system to create smaller communities within the school and increase students' sense of belonging. The committee provided training—some jointly held with school and OST program staff—and then monitored implementation of these SEL strategies on campus. These strategies helped make relatively new SEL activities part of the everyday, taken-for-granted functioning of the campus, which the committee members hypothesized would help make SEL more sustainable at Webster.

Enacting Daily SEL Rituals in School and After School

As a first step in promoting SEL practices on campus, the committee trained all teachers and OST program instructors to enact three SEL rituals⁶ with students on a daily basis, as shown in Figure 2. The first routine was warm welcomes, such as high fives, handshakes, and welcoming questions, that were formally integrated into the beginning of each school and afterschool program day. Teachers, counselors, office staff, and other school staff stood near the entrances to the school at the beginning of each day, enthusiastically welcoming students. They created a shared Webster song that every student and staff member sang at the beginning of the day as they transitioned into classrooms. OST program staff cultivated a similarly welcoming environment as students entered the afterschool program; every day, the staff and students started the program by reciting a poem of affirmation.

The second short SEL ritual was engaging practices. Teachers and OST program instructors could select from a variety of options—such as brain breaks⁷ to anchor students’ thinking and learning—and they were trained to use them in their instruction every day.

The third ritual was an optimistic closure; every school day closed with an optimistic announcement over the intercom system, and teachers concluded classes with a positive wrap-up. These

FIGURE 2
A Description of Daily SEL Rituals at Webster

Signature Practices

- **WHAT:** The norms and routines that reinforce the acquisition of the five SEL competencies, and are used in classrooms, staff meetings, and common spaces such as cafeterias and hallways.
- **WHY:** Provides constructive opportunities for adults and students to practice their explicit SEL skills.
- **HOW:** There are three categories of Signature Practices: Welcoming Activity, Engaging Practices, and Optimistic Closing.

WARM WELCOME – Students are welcomed upon arriving to school and to the After-School program and students are greeted by name by teachers at the classroom threshold.

ENGAGING PRACTICES – Students are engaged during morning meetings (table chats) and with brain breaks.

OPTIMISTIC CLOSING – Both the in-school time and OST end the day with a poem of affirmation and an optimistic closing question discussion.

NOTES: The steering committee outlined three SEL routines in the Webster SEL binder. This binder included records of SEL activities and served as a primer for new staff.

optimistic closures were intended to highlight the importance of the work that students and teachers were doing, provide a sense of accomplishment, and help identify next steps.

The campus-wide rituals were documented in schedules included in the SEL binder, as seen in Figure 3. One of the district SEL coaches who worked with Webster thought that the intentionality with which Webster staff made space for SEL—such as creating clear time for SEL activities in its bell schedule—made it easier for teachers and instructors to adopt them. In addition to providing training in these rituals, the steering committee monitored the degree to which they saw staff using rituals by observing teachers and instructors working with students.

FIGURE 3
Webster SEL Learning Schedule

Social Emotional Learning Schedule		
In-School		
WHAT	WHEN	WHERE
Warm Welcome	7:00 AM	Entrance/Threshold
Song of the Day	7:55 AM	All Classes
Morning Meetings	8:00 AM	All Classes
Breathing Brain Break	11:00 AM	All Classes
Movement Brain Break	1:00 PM	All Classes
Explicit Instruction	All Day (Thurs)	Music/ Gym/Art & 1 st /3 rd
Optimistic Closing	3:10 PM	All Classes
Bell Ringers (10 with a Pen)	1 st 10 Minutes of Class	All Classes
Out-of-School		
WHAT	WHEN	WHERE
Warm Welcome	3:00 PM	Threshold
Bell Ringers	3:05 PM	Cafeteria/Gym
Free Play with Playworks	3:30 PM	Playground/Gym
Trunks	4:15 PM	Room #101
Mindfulness	4:00 PM	Cafeteria
Explicit Instruction	3:40 PM (Thurs)	Cafe/Gym/Room #101
Project Based Enrichment	4:15 PM	Room #101, 107 & 109
Optimistic Closing	5:20 PM	Room #101, 107 & 109
Weekly Reward(VIP Carnival) (*)	3:00 PM (Fri)	Room #101

NOTES: Steering committee members linked activities like bell ringers (which are brief activities to start class) and the weekly reward/VIP carnival to SEL. For instance, a bell ringer activity could be about an SEL topic, and students could gain entrance to the carnival—an earned reward event—by setting an example in SEL. This schedule is excerpted from the SEL binder.



Webster students received explicit SEL instruction during the school day in *specials* (e.g., music, gym), and three times per week during their afterschool program.

Over time, these rituals began to take root. In our day-long observations in 2019–2020, prior to COVID-19 school closures, we saw one or more of them in action in 77 percent of observed school instructional sessions and in 75 percent of OST program instructional sessions. These were among the highest percentages observed across SEL Dallas.

Notably, the Webster steering committee decided that not all teachers needed to use the explicit SEL curriculum, Harmony SEL, that the rest of the six schools in the SEL Dallas cohort used. Once Webster received the Harmony SEL lessons in 2018–2019, the committee decided that only the specials teachers (e.g., music, art, gym) would provide full SEL lessons once a week on Thursdays. This ensured that all students received a lesson from the curriculum at some point during the week. For other teachers, the committee’s guidance was “To each his own,” according to one Webster teacher. This choice fit within the committee’s approach to strategically select SEL strategies that were easy to use and minimized burden.

Meanwhile, the afterschool program delivered regular, explicit instruction using lesson plans developed specifically for SEL Dallas by the out-of-school-time intermediary (OSTI) organization, Big Thought, and a partner organization, Dallas Afterschool. The lessons were written to complement the Harmony SEL curriculum. OST program instructors across SEL Dallas delivered three SEL lessons per week based on these plans. Given that the school and OST program had different expectations for explicit SEL instruction at Webster, the three short SEL rituals described above became the primary SEL practices shared between the two groups.

Developing a Shared Set of SEL Terms

The committee included shared terminology in the SEL binder, used the terminology during staff training, and then monitored its use by both school and OST program staff. Sharing common language can help embed new concepts within organizations' daily functions, making it feel more like a part of everyday life. Some of the terminology, such as terms like "warm welcome," was standard, and others were unique to the Webster campus. For example, the committee encouraged staff to notice and praise students who helped each other in the hallway by saying aloud that the student was following the "Webster Wildcat Way."

To make the daily SEL rituals and terminology second nature to all staff members, the steering committee invested considerable effort in SEL training. This began in 2017–2018 with a focus on building staff buy-in to SEL; 20 minutes of SEL training was built into schoolwide teacher meetings each week. The SEL specialist did the same in her weekly meetings with OST instructors.

One schoolwide training that we observed taught staff how to highlight positive actions that some students were engaging in, as opposed to pointing out negative aspects of behavior. Instead of saying, "You're not paying attention!" to a student, a teacher could say, "I



"We want consistent SEL practices so that we use the same terminology with our students before, during, and after school."

Sean Hamilton,
counselor, Webster
Elementary School

Lesson Learned

Support provided by the steering committee enabled staff across campus to master SEL strategies—e.g., short SEL routines, shared SEL language, and a house system—which helped embed SEL throughout Webster, potentially supporting longer-term sustainability of SEL on campus.



A Webster student dressed in house colors.

like how so many students are listening to their partner reading.” Teachers practiced doing this with one another during the training, and the counselor then observed interactions between teachers and students over the subsequent week at school. He then updated his fellow steering committee members at their next meeting about the degree to which he saw teachers using positive framing to encourage students throughout the day.

To build consistency between SEL practices during the school day and those after school, the school and OST program staff attended several trainings together. In 2019, 52 percent of surveyed teachers at Webster said that they had participated in joint professional development (PD) with their OST program colleagues, compared to a 34 percent average across all schools participating in SEL Dallas.⁸

Creating Small Communities Using a House System

In fall 2019, the steering committee began collaborating with a separate teacher committee at Webster to carry out a third strategy, which they called the *house system*.⁹ The goal was to create smaller communities within the campus to increase a sense of student belonging and student-staff camaraderie. Students and staff members from the school and OST program were assigned to one of four houses. Students sat with their houses at lunch, rather than with their classes. Staff hosted monthly house meetings, and the houses could compete in weekly competitions.

Highlighting the inclusiveness of the system, a committee member told us, “Each and every person—OST, janitor, all of us—are in a house.” When assigning students and staff to the houses, another member said, “[We] mixed all bilingual classrooms up with the general [education] classrooms because they really didn’t intermingle very much during the school day.”

STAFF MEMBERS' CONSISTENT USE OF SEL WAS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL AND OST IMPROVEMENTS

There are some indications that Webster's adoption of short SEL rituals, shared language, and the house system was associated with positive campus-wide changes. For instance, the percentage of students who missed ten or more days of school decreased from 13 percent in 2017–2018 to 8 percent in 2018–2019 and to 4 percent in 2019–2020. According to survey responses in spring 2021, 100 percent of Webster school staff members agreed or strongly agreed that their SEL PD changed the way that they interacted with students; 100 percent also agreed that their school had a clear vision for social and emotional learning.

It is also likely that the campus-wide SEL strategies led to positive changes in Webster's climate. Several data points suggest this; for instance, in our day-long observations—starting in fall 2017 and continuing through winter 2020—student-to-student interactions on campus improved slightly every year, from fall 2017 to the most recent observations in winter 2020. School staff echoed this sentiment in our annual surveys; in spring 2021, 100 percent of school staff agreed or strongly agreed that the climate at Webster supported the development of students' social and emotional skills, as opposed to 87 percent in spring 2018. In addition, from spring 2018 to spring 2021, there were increases in the percentage of school staff who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- “Students treat teachers with respect” increased from 58 to 100 percent.
- “Students treat students with respect” increased from 53 to 100 percent.
- “Students care about each other” increased from 68 to 100 percent.

Finally, as noted in the introduction to this case study, one of the reasons that Webster leaders initially pursued participation in SEL Dallas was that they were experiencing behavioral challenges

with their students. The school reported that there was a significant reduction in disciplinary events, such as referrals to the office, during Webster’s participation in SEL Dallas. Qualitatively, interviewees also stated that the focus on SEL had positive effects on student behavior; as one staff member said, “We have seen a real change in our student behavior, especially from the kids who received SEL [for multiple years].”

WEBSTER RELIED ON ITS ESTABLISHED SEL STRATEGIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 disruptions put the sustainability of Webster’s SEL strategies to the test. When COVID-19 forced campus closures in spring 2020, leaders and staff members quickly realized that the pandemic could amplify symptoms of anxiety and trauma. Staff surveys from spring 2021 indicated that the investment that the Webster campus had previously made in SEL helped them contend with some key pandemic disruptions; 93 percent of Webster school staff agreed or strongly agreed that their school’s focus on SEL helped their students cope with challenges related to COVID-19. Eighty-seven percent agreed or strongly agreed that SEL helped *them* cope with challenges of the pandemic.¹⁰

While Webster’s preexisting focus on SEL might have helped teachers and students cope, COVID-19 posed significant challenges to the school–OST program partnership. Enrollment in TMAS dropped from around 100 students in previous years to 20. Because of planned expansion of their SEL efforts—unrelated to COVID-19—the SEL specialist started to split her time between Webster and another school. Moreover, there was an almost entirely new staff at the afterschool program, which meant starting SEL training from scratch. Due to restrictions on the number of people who could enter the building, the SEL committee stopped holding joint trainings for school and OST program staff.

Webster adapted its SEL strategies to be more appropriate for the pandemic. As noted, some key dimensions of SEL-based

climate at Webster included chants and songs, greetings with high fives or handshakes, sharing circles, and other in-person relationship-building with students; staff could no longer engage in many of these activities, which required close contact. The steering committee had to suggest new ways for instructors to accomplish some of the same goals, in order to keep their SEL-focused climate moving forward despite COVID-19 restrictions. For instance, instead of handshakes or high fives, teachers and students held up a Webster “W” with their fingers to greet one another.

The steering committee tried to continue its work, even though the school and OST staff had limited interaction with one another due to the pandemic. In spring 2021, a committee member reported, “Our partnership is still very strong, it’s just more from a leadership-to-leadership perspective and not from a staff-to-staff perspective.” The steering committee cut back on the frequency of its meetings, from weekly to monthly, but this was not necessarily seen as undesirable. A committee member shared, “We’re not meeting every week like we used to, but things are rolling. There are so many people now [who are] a part of the [SEL] process, that we don’t have to meet as often because there’s just so many people doing a lot of the work.” In other words, the team felt that they had been successful in distributing responsibility for SEL across staff at their schools.

Survey results support the idea that staff at Webster had a sense of shared responsibility that was substantially above average. On the spring 2021 survey, 96 percent of Webster school staff agreed or strongly agreed that administrators and staff collaboratively developed SEL norms on the campus; 96 percent also agreed or strongly agreed that “Teachers in this school feel responsible for promoting students’ SEL.” These percentages represent an increase since the beginning of SEL Dallas and were above average among participating SEL Dallas schools.

In short, although teachers and OST program staff members could not meet in person or as frequently



“As soon as you walked through the door you became a part of a community that really saw you, celebrated culture, and believed that with love and high expectations, we all could become the best versions of ourselves.”

Latrisha McDuffie,
SEL specialist, Thriving
Minds After School, Webster

Lesson Learned

While Webster’s SEL strategies required adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic, they helped school and OST program staff carry SEL practices forward in the midst of unexpected challenges.

during the pandemic, the SEL strategies they had already established kept continuity in SEL on campus. They discovered that Webster staff were adaptable, finding ways to modify past SEL routines into new forms that were COVID-friendly.

CONCLUSION

This case describes a high-functioning school-OST steering committee and how it identified and enacted strategies to make SEL sustainable. While a large majority of the 38 school and OST program partners that worked to implement SEL programming during the first phase of PSELI had SEL committees, few met as frequently, worked as systematically to train staff and then monitor their work, or created the same degree of written documentation collected in an SEL binder for onboarding new staff.

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), in which we describe approaches such as developing a brand-new school-OST partnership focusing on SEL, finding and protecting time for SEL in the school and afterschool schedules, and incorporating equity into SEL, among others.

We conclude by summarizing the successes and challenges the SEL committee faced at Webster Elementary and TMAS and identify factors that contributed to the successes or mitigated the challenges.

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

- As Webster staff began using the SEL strategies promoted by the steering committee, we noted a series of improvements, including in attendance, school climate, and student behavior.
- Staff beyond the steering committee began sharing responsibility for SEL on campus—one important goal of the committee. To be sustainable on campus, SEL needs to be embraced by a wider group than just a committee.
- As intended, short SEL rituals became embedded in Webster's daily agenda before the outset of the pandemic. Staff learned

them well enough to adapt them to a COVID-19-friendly format when classes resumed in a hybrid fashion.

- The school adopted an inclusive house system that interviewees said succeeded in increasing students' sense of belonging and connectedness.
- Up until the pandemic, Webster was successful in implementing PD that included both school and OST staff and had a strong focus on sharing common SEL practices across both settings.

Webster and TMAS also experienced some challenges that the partnership worked to overcome:

- Due to logistical constraints, there were no frontline OST program staff members on the steering committee, as we found was common for most SEL committees.
- The pandemic impeded the joint school and OST training that the steering committee had put in place prior to the pandemic.

Several factors enabled successes and helped to mitigate **challenges** at Webster and TMAS:

- The SEL committee included school and OST leaders who set the strategy for SEL and had the authority to make choices about PD content and scheduling.
- The committee included a good balance of staff with logistics expertise, content knowledge, and a data orientation.
- The district and OSTI provided guidance—like tools for guided conversations to help monitor SEL implementation—to the steering committee and broader campus. A district SEL coach served as a steering committee member and was able to translate district-level guidance.
- The committee was strategic about selecting approaches to SEL that could be adopted with ease, particularly as SEL concepts were new to many staff members.
- The steering committee carefully strategized to provide clear and consistent guidance to the broader staff.
- The SEL committee documented its strategies and policies to enable newly incoming staff to learn and execute the campus's SEL programming.

Finally, Webster’s investments in SEL appeared to help students and staff during the pandemic. Many of Webster’s SEL routines relied on actions such as handshakes, high fives, singing, and chanting; COVID-19 meant that the staff could not continue these routines as they had established them. However, Webster teachers and TMAS instructors adapted their daily rituals to fit hybrid instruction and reported that SEL helped them, and their students, cope with the challenges of COVID-19.

Key Takeaways to Strengthen SEL Committees

- Staffing the SEL committee with committed leaders and SEL content experts ensured that it had the authority and the needed content knowledge to make decisions.
- Including a district staff member on the SEL committee opened lines of communication between the school and the district.
- Adopting simple, short SEL rituals first made implementation easier for those new to SEL.
- Taking time as a SEL committee to strategize resulted in clear and consistent guidance to staff.
- Documenting SEL strategies and policies in writing enabled new staff to learn and execute the SEL programming.

APPENDIX

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 that 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), 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 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 that 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 Webster and TMAS specifically. Although we did survey Webster's TMAS instructors each year, because the number of respondents was less than ten, we are unable to report on this data. 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 Webster Elementary School and Thriving Minds After School

Data Category	Fall 2017	Spring 2018	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	Winter 2020	Spring 2020	Spring 2021
Observations of instructional time	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	—	—
Extra observations related to case study topic (e.g., staff meetings, additional classes)				✓ ⁺	✓ ⁺	—	✓ ⁺
Staff survey (school staff response rate)	✓ (57%)	✓ (75%)	✓ (76%)			—	✓ (65%)
Interviews of principal and OST program director	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓/✗	✓
Interviews of teachers and OST program instructors			✓	✓		—	✓
Interviews of additional SEL roles (e.g., coaches, SEL leads)	✓	✓	✓	✓		—	✓
Interviews of non-instructional staff (e.g., cafeteria worker, secretary)				*		—	—
Documents related to SEL	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

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

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

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

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

* = collected at case study sites only.

ABBREVIATIONS

CASEL	Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
OST	out-of-school-time
OSTI	out-of-school-time intermediary
PD	professional development
PSELI	Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative
SEL	social and emotional learning
TMAS	Thriving Minds After School

ENDNOTES

¹ Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, “What Is SEL?” webpage, undated. As of February 23, 2020: <https://casel.org/what-is-sel>. CASEL 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 which 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.

² Due to COVID-19 disruptions, this number was significantly lower during the 2020–2021 school year.

³ The SEL specialist role was a full-time position unique to the OST programs in SEL Dallas. The SEL specialist played a dual role in the first year of the grant, in which she was the manager of the OST program, served as an SEL coach to OST staff, and built connections with staff members across the school and OST. In subsequent years, she played the roles of SEL coach and school-OST connector but did not technically manage the OST program.

⁴ SEL Dallas, *SEL Dallas Implementation Guidebook*, 2020–2021, undated. As of June 30, 2022: <https://seldallas.org/guidebook/>

⁵ *Climate* refers to the features of a school or OST environment that youth and adults experience. School climate can include aspects of physical space, culture, norms, goals, values, and practices (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; 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).

⁶ The SEL routines used on the Webster campus are derived from CASEL’s three signature practices (see www.casel.org).

⁷ *Brain breaks* are brief activities that increase students’ readiness to learn and can include breathing, stretching, and mindfulness activities.

⁸ We do not have 2020 survey data, and, because of the pandemic, school and OST staff did not meet together in 2021. See Table A.1 for survey response rates.

⁹ The house system that Webster used was informed by its experience at an off-site training (committee members and other Webster teachers attended the Ron Clark Academy: <https://ronclarkacademy.com/about-rca/>).

¹⁰ We cannot report on TMAS OST staff surveys for anonymity reasons because there were fewer than ten staff members to invite to take the survey.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

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.

More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this case study should be directed to Alice Huguet at ahuguet@rand.org, and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.

The Wallace Foundation’s Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative is a six-year initiative that The Wallace Foundation launched in 2017 to explore whether and how children benefit when schools and their out-of-school-time programs partner to improve social and emotional learning (SEL), as well as what it takes to do this work.

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 Dallas’s Webster Elementary School and its out-of-school-time program, Thriving Minds After School, formed a SEL committee that became more effective over time, focusing on daily activities to make SEL stick.

As Webster staff began using the SEL strategies promoted by the steering committee, attendance, school climate, and student behavior improved. Staff beyond the steering committee began sharing responsibility for SEL on campus—one important goal of the committee. To be sustainable on campus, SEL needs to be embraced by a wider group than just a committee. The school adopted an inclusive house system that interviewees said succeeded in increasing students’ sense of belonging and connectedness.

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