EXEMPLARY: NAVIGATING SEL FROM THE INSIDE OUT

LOOKING INSIDE & ACROSS LEADING SEL PROGRAMS:
A PRACTICAL RESOURCE FOR SCHOOLS AND OST PROVIDERS

MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL FOCUS

NOVEMBER 2022

This is an excerpt of the full guide, which can be found on The Wallace Foundation Knowledge Center:

Stephanie M. Jones, Katharine E. Brush, Samantha Wettje, Thelma Ramirez, Aashna Poddar, Alisha Kannarr, Sophie P. Barnes, Annie Hooper, Gretchen Brion–Meisels, and Edwin Chng

THE EASEL LAB @ THE HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
WITH FUNDING FROM THE WALLACE FOUNDATION
INTRODUCTION

Social, emotional, and related skills are important to many areas of development, including learning, health, and well-being (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Moffitt et al., 2011; etc.). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that high-quality, evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs produce positive outcomes for PreK–12 students, including improved behavior, attitudes, and academic performance (e.g., Bierman et al., 2010; Diamond & Lee, 2011; Durlak et al., 2011; Hurd & Deutsche, 2017; Jones, Bailey, Barnes & Doolittle, 2017; McClelland et al., 2017). The Navigating SEL From the Inside Out PreK–5 guide gave us a look inside and across preschool and elementary-focused SEL interventions and programs — and the specific skills, strategies, and programmatic features that likely drive those positive student outcomes. However, we still know little about what is “inside” middle and high school SEL programs.

In this guide, we define social and emotional learning programs as those that are designed to build the social and emotional skills and competencies of children and youth by: (a) explicitly teaching specific skills through direct instruction, including introducing and modeling SEL skills and supporting students in using and applying them across diverse settings; (b) improving classroom and school climate, often by targeting teacher practices and school norms and expectations; and/or (c) influencing student mindsets such as their perceptions of themselves, others, and school (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). This guide focuses specifically on SEL programs designed for youth aged 11–18 and for use in middle and high schools and other organized learning environments such as out-of-school-time (OST) and youth development programs.

A great number of SEL programs are available for schools and OST organizations to choose from, and they vary widely in skill focus, teaching strategies, implementation supports, and general approach to SEL. For example, some programs target empathy, conflict resolution, and problem-solving/decision-making skills while others focus more on identity, personal values, or other related constructs. Some programs rely heavily on didactic instruction or class discussions as their primary teaching strategy, while others incorporate additional methods such as readings, role play, reflective journaling, and more. Programs also vary substantially in their emphasis and material support for adult skill building, school culture and climate, family and community engagement, and other components beyond direct child-focused activities or lessons.

We know SEL programs work, but we don’t know as much about what is inside them that drives those positive outcomes or differentiates one program from another in ways that impact their feasibility and fit across diverse learning settings.

This report was designed to help educators and other organizations and adults who work with youth look inside SEL programs and see what makes them different from one another in order to choose a program that best suits their needs.

---

1 This is the definition of an SEL program used in this report. This definition may not be reflected in all its aspects for some SEL programs, and the implementation of some SEL programs may vary in ways that affect some aspects of this definition.
THE LANDSCAPE OF ADOLESCENT SEL

Much attention has been given to SEL during early childhood and elementary school, with fewer interventions and evaluations focusing on middle and high school. However, what we know about adolescent development from the fields of psychology and neuroscience indicates that adolescence is an especially important time to provide youth with opportunities to strengthen and develop their social and emotional competence.

The Importance of SEL in Adolescence

Adolescence is a period of intense growth and development that typically begins in puberty and lasts until early adulthood, from around age 10 to about 25. As with other developmental stages, our experiences during adolescence have long-term impacts. The changes that happen between puberty and the mid-20s create a period of profound cognitive, social, and emotional transformation, as well as intense learning about who we are and who we want to be (Center for the Developing Adolescent [CDA], 2019). During this developmental stage, we show high neural plasticity and sensitivity to environmental influences, making it a key window for learning and discovery as well as an opportunity to mitigate the effects of earlier adversity (CDA, 2021; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Kenner & Raab, 2021; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2019). During adolescence, we undergo immense neurological, psychological, and cognitive changes that unlock more complex decision making, reflection, and reasoning abilities while also placing new and increased demands on emotion regulation and impulse control (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Yeager, 2017). In addition to these internal changes, we experience many shifts in our external environments: we transition from the structured format of elementary school to individualized schedules in middle school and, later, to managing an even higher degree of autonomy in high school. While we are expanding our social circles, we are also learning to juggle new academic demands (e.g., more challenging coursework) with an increasingly important social life.

Social, emotional, and related skills are particularly important both for helping us navigate the adolescent years and preparing us for future success in school, work, and life. During this time, it is important that we strengthen the skills that will help us make decisions, manage our emotions, and create deeper connections with peers, romantic partners, and others around us (CDA, 2021). Because the adolescent brain becomes more responsive to dopamine — a neurotransmitter that gives us intense feelings of reward — and a new flood of hormones increases the appeal of new experiences (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006), it is important to harness this drive in positive directions that encourage us to take healthy risks (such as developing our skills with new roles, relationships, and responsibilities) that will help us solidify the lasting values, beliefs, purpose, and sense of identity that will prepare us for the challenges of adulthood (CDA, 2019; NASEM, 2019). During this developmental stage, it is important for us to develop a positive sense of identity, contribute meaningfully to our communities, have more autonomy, receive attention and respect from peers, find safe and healthy ways to explore the world and try out new experiences, and plan for the future. Social and emotional skills such as critical thinking, goal setting, conflict management, effective communication, emotion recognition and regulation, and self-awareness (including exploring and understanding one’s identity in context) are well suited to helping us navigate these changes and setting us up for future success.
**SEL Programming for Adolescents**

Despite the many ways that social, emotional, and related skills benefit adolescents, empirical research on the effectiveness of SEL programs for middle and high school remains limited. SEL programming has traditionally focused on elementary school-aged students, and SEL programs and strategies for adolescents have only recently gained prominence thanks to better national funding opportunities (e.g., American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, ESSA Title IV funds, US Department of Education Center to Improve SEL and School Safety; Yoder et al., 2020) and heightened attention to student mental health and well-being, particularly as schools face disruptions and mental health challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, meta-analyses of some high-quality adolescent SEL programs show promising results, such as improved academic performance, positive attitude toward self and others, improved mental and physical health, better relationships with adults and peers, and positive prosocial behaviors (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2015; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2010; Yeager, 2017). Moreover, most programs included in this guide have demonstrated positive effects on a variety of adolescent social, emotional, behavioral, academic, and mental health outcomes.

Despite the encouraging results from some high-quality adolescent SEL programs, however, many traditional school-based SEL programs have failed to produce results, in part because they fail to successfully connect to adolescents. One issue is that these programs are often simply “aged-up” versions of programs for younger children, making them feel inauthentic and uninteresting to teens. For instance, as Yeager (2017) points out in his review of adolescent SEL, programs often deliver the same content as in elementary grades but with teenage characters or contexts (e.g., setting a story in a middle school cafeteria instead of a playground). These can feel irrelevant to teens, who are tackling vastly different challenges than younger children and, consequently, have different SEL needs. Furthermore, elementary school SEL skill-building programs tend to use a more top-down approach that competes with adolescents’ increasing need for autonomy (Durlak et al., 2011; Yeager, 2017); adolescents may find it condescending and a challenge to their independence to be told what skills they need or what choices to make. Nationwide surveys of high school teachers have also found that they are less likely to implement SEL in their classrooms than elementary school teachers and that they lack the resources and supports necessary to successfully integrate SEL into their curricula (Hamilton & Doss, 2019). In a Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) survey of youth ages 14–22, most said that their school is not helping them sufficiently develop SEL skills (DePaoli et al., 2018).

SEL’s promise for supporting healthy adolescent development makes it pertinent to explore what high-quality SEL content and implementation looks like for middle and high schoolers and to better understand the broader landscape of programming focused on adolescent social and emotional development. For instance, prevention programs that build healthy life skills (e.g., sex education and substance abuse prevention), as well as those that use a Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework to engage youth voluntarily in interest-based programming, have successfully taught many of the skills covered by traditional school-based SEL programs — such as building positive relationships, communicating effectively, and setting goals — by embedding SEL skill building in relevant content. Both PYD and SEL take a whole-child approach to working with youth. That is, they focus on skill building to support independence and the ability to navigate the demands of adulthood (NASEM, 2020; Spero-Swingle, 2019). In addition, OST settings play an especially important role in adolescent development. Athletic leagues, local camps, and larger national organizations
(e.g., 4-H, Outward Bound, Boys & Girls Clubs, and Big Brothers Big Sisters) have successfully used PYD and SEL models to give adolescents a space to foster healthy relationships with adults and peers, learn cooperation and communication skills, and develop individual and group identities. In contrast to the fragmented daily schedules of most middle and high school students, OST settings can provide a consistent environment for adolescents as they navigate increasing demands of autonomy and identity. Please refer to Table 3: Components of Each Program in Chapter 5 for a comparison of the extent to which programs are designed and provide materials and/or resources for use in OST settings.

**Considerations for Adolescent SEL**

Though most of what we know about effective SEL practice comes from research with younger students, experts (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Hamilton & Doss, 2019; Kenner & Raab, 2021; Yeager, 2017) have laid out several important factors to consider if SEL is to work successfully in middle and high schools:

- **First, because middle and high school days are often organized around individual schedules, teachers have few opportunities for consistent SEL practice with all students.** As such, SEL programs need to be flexible in the ways that they can be delivered to students. This could mean integrating SEL into the academic curriculum and/or extracurricular activities, providing flexible lesson plans for teachers to adapt based on the time and resources available to them, setting aside time for regular and intentional community building and SEL skill practice during advisory period or homeroom, or equipping all adults in the building (e.g., counselors, librarians, nurses, coaches, and those in paraprofessional and support roles) to foster SEL skills in informal interactions with students.

- **Second, the fragmented schedules and related structural challenges at the secondary level heighten the need to consider the school’s overall culture and climate and to move beyond the traditional focus on student skill building.** Safe and respectful learning environments and opportunities to form caring, secure relationships with peers and adults are essential for all SEL regardless of age. But they may be even more important for adolescents, who are particularly sensitive to stress, peer judgement, status, and respect. A holistic approach to SEL that focuses on administrators, teachers, counselors, and students can foster positive and reciprocal relationships among students and adults and create a safe environment for adolescents to explore their identities and autonomy. For these reasons, focusing on both student skill building and school culture (i.e., the shared values, rules, and beliefs — including norms, unwritten rules, traditions, and expectations — among individuals in a school; Kane et al., 2016) and climate (i.e., the overarching experience or quality of school life, including experiences with safety, teaching and learning, and interpersonal relationships; Kane et al., 2016) is likely to be the most effective approach to SEL.

- **Last, though we include both middle and high school SEL programs in this guide, it is important to highlight that middle and high school students have different developmental needs.** One example concerns identity development. Students in middle school begin paying attention to group identities such as gender, race, or social class, while students in high school are more focused on developing an individuated identity, separate from their peers and families. SEL programs that seek to support identity development need to factor these subtle but important differences into their curricula. Please refer to the section on Developmental Considerations in Chapter 1 for more information on the specific developmental needs of both age groups. In addition, the detailed program profiles in Chapter 6 outline
the differences in the type of skills addressed and instructional methods used in each program’s middle vs. high school lessons.

These topics are explored in further detail in Chapter 1: Background on SEL Skills and Interventions, where we provide more information about best practices for SEL programming and high-quality implementation.

**How can I use the information in this guide to make decisions about my school or out-of-school time setting?**

We often hear that logistical considerations such as time, training, and cost are the key factors driving decisions about program selection. Though these parameters are certainly important, a number of other considerations also influence program impact. SEL programs are ultimately most successful when they are feasible (i.e., align well with the resources and constraints of a particular setting) and when they are a good fit for the context (i.e., meet the needs of the setting) and can be easily woven into the fabric of the setting’s culture.

As this guide illustrates, programs vary greatly in their content focus, instructional methods, and additional features beyond core lessons such as training, family and community engagement, culture and climate supports, and more. It is therefore important to use relevant data (e.g., school data on attendance and behavior; classroom observations; school climate questionnaires; staff, student, and parent surveys; etc.) to understand what your students and teachers need, including what skills are most important to focus on, which instructional methods best align with students’ interests and teachers’ skills, and which programs offer additional components that will support high-quality implementation in your setting.

**We recommend referring to the accompanying “How to Use the Navigating SEL Guide” supplement as you read this guide. It includes a streamlined process and set of worksheets designed to help readers navigate and use the detailed information in this guide to make decisions about SEL.**

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE & FOCUS OF THIS GUIDE?**

Without detailed information about the specific content and approach of pre-packaged SEL programs, schools, OST organizations, and other practitioners tasked with developing young people’s social and emotional skills can find it challenging to select and use SEL programs or adopt SEL strategies that are best suited to their specific needs and goals. They need resources that comprehensively describe program content in a way that lets them see what is inside SEL programs so that they can make informed decisions about SEL programs and strategies.

This guide fills that need by looking inside 18 middle and high school SEL programs to identify and summarize key features and attributes of SEL programming for young people ages 11–18.

**Purpose & Objectives**

This guide is designed to:

1. **Help schools and OST organizations identify SEL programs and strategies that are a good fit for their students and settings.** Schools and OST organizations vary widely in their missions, structures, pedagogies, and target populations, as do SEL programs. This report builds on and complements other tools in the field
(e.g., the CASEL Program Guide, the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality’s Preparing Youth to Thrive Field Guide, RAND’s review of SEL Interventions Under ESSA, Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development, etc.) to provide schools and similar youth-serving learning settings detailed information about the curricular content and features of each program in a way that lets them look across varying approaches and make informed choices about which type of SEL programming is best suited to their context and needs.

2. Give schools and OST providers current information about the theory and practice of adolescent SEL.

   The report can help readers gain a basic understanding of adolescent SEL research and practice, including current opportunities and challenges in the field of adolescent SEL and how to harness or address them. Our hope is that the information we share about key developmental, contextual, and cultural considerations as well as best practices for SEL programming will help guide school- or program-wide SEL efforts and program selection, adaptation, and design in schools and OST programs.

3. Offer schools, OST providers, and other educational organizations who work with youth and may not be able to access or afford pre-packaged SEL programs a starting place from which to shape their SEL efforts. This report can provide a basic overview of the types of skills, strategies, trainings, and implementation supports typically offered in leading SEL programs, offering a foundation from which to build or design their own independent approach to SEL.

Figure 1. Information and Tools Included in Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>18 SEL Programs for Middle &amp; High School Schools OST Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**ANALYSIS OF:**

- **SEL Skills & Competencies**  
  Cognitive, Emotion, Social, Values, Perspectives, Identity, Responsible Decision Making

- **Instructional Methods**  
  Strategies and activities used to teach skills

- **Program Components**  
  Program features that support high-quality implementation (e.g., training, family engagement, etc.)

**TOOLS FOR INFORMED DECISION MAKING:**

- **Program Snapshots**  
  Brief individual program overviews providing key information and details

- **In-Depth Program Profiles**  
  A comprehensive look at each program’s evidence base, skill focus, instructional methods, and other features

- **Tools for Looking Across Programs**  
  Tables, graphs, and analyses to explore relative skill focus, instructional methods, and additional features across programs

- **Planning Tools**  
  Guide and worksheet to support data-driven decision making and program selection
**Intended Audience**

The guide is designed for use by educators; school counselors, psychologists, and social workers; school, OST program, and district administrators; and other youth-focused professionals and youth-serving organizations seeking to promote the healthy social and emotional development of adolescents (i.e., youth from ages 10 to about 25 or middle- and high school-aged youth) across diverse learning settings, including schools and school districts; youth afterschool, summer, and community programs; and more.

**Attention to Out-of-School Time Settings**

This report is also distinct in the attention it gives to SEL programming in OST settings. Out-of-school youth development programs such as 4-H, Outward Bound, Boys and Girls Clubs, etc. have long been the primary settings for promoting adolescent social and emotional development; however, few evidence-based SEL programs have been specifically designed for OST contexts, particularly for middle and high schoolers. Yet there are many reasons to believe that a more explicit partnership between SEL and OST programs might benefit youth, not the least of which is that many emerging best practices in the field of afterschool and OST programming align with the central goals of SEL. For that reason, we include program profiles for 11 SEL programs that are designed for, have been used in, or provide comprehensive activities or adaptations for OST settings. We also provide a set of guiding principles and considerations to help OST programs select or adapt in-school SEL programs for their own settings, with special consideration for how to enhance coordination across in- and out-of-school time (see Chapter 2: A Focus on Out-of-School Time).

**Emphasis on Equitable and Trauma-Informed SEL**

When selecting an SEL program, it is important to consider the backgrounds and experiences of students and staff and to understand which types of training and resources programs provide to ensure that SEL is delivered in ways that benefit all students; promote safe and inclusive learning environments; support educators in examining and challenging biases in their teaching and youth work practice; and work toward respect, equality, and justice. This guide includes chapters on equitable and trauma-informed SEL that provide detailed considerations and best practices for integrating the above principles and practices into everyday SEL efforts (see Chapter 3: Achieving Equitable SEL and Chapter 4: A Trauma-Sensitive Approach to SEL), and the program profiles in Chapter 6 include detailed information about the types of resources each program provides to address issues of equitable and inclusive SEL, such as training and adult-focused reflection activities, as well as guidance on how to approach and adapt the curricular content and materials (see “Equitable and Inclusive Education” in the program component section of each profile in Chapter 6: Program Profiles).

**WHAT PROGRAMS ARE INCLUDED?**

As Figure 2 shows, we selected 18 middle and high school SEL programs to include in this guide. They fall into three developmental categories:

1. Programs designed for use with middle school students;
(2) Programs designed for use with middle and high school students that provide grade-differentiated lessons and/or separate but conceptually linked curricula for middle and high school (e.g., Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence for grades 6–8 and Lions Quest Skills for Action for grades 9–12); and

(3) Programs designed for use with middle and high school students that use a single set of lessons with all students, often with suggested adaptations for different ages or learning levels.

**Figure 2. 18 Programs in the Guide**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>Middle &amp; High School (Differentiated)</th>
<th>Middle &amp; High School (Combined)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls on the Run Heart &amp; Sole Curriculum† (Grades 6–8)</td>
<td>The Fourth R (Grades 7–9)</td>
<td>Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR) (Grades 6–12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RiPP) (Grades 6–8)</td>
<td>GET Real: Comprehensive Sex Education That Works (Grades 6–9)</td>
<td>Facing History and Ourselves (Grades 6–12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Step for Middle School (Grades 6–8)</td>
<td>Imagine Purpose Prep (Grades 6–12)</td>
<td>Pure Power (Grades 6–12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lions Quest (Grades 6–12)</td>
<td>Student Success Skills (SSS) for SEL (Grades 6–9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive Action† (Grades 6–12)</td>
<td>Teen Outreach Program† (Grades 6–12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive Prevention PLUS (Grades 6–12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) (Grades 6–12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RULER (Grades 6–12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Too Good for Drugs and Violence (Grades 6–12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Youth Communication (Grades 6–12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†Designed specifically for, or commonly used in, OST Settings

**A note about high school programs:** No programs selected for this guide are designed exclusively for use with high school students, which is consistent with what we know about the broader landscape of SEL programming for high school. Until recently, much of the research on and practice of SEL has focused on elementary and middle schools. In their review of SEL at urban high schools, Hamedani et al. (2015) propose that this may be due to a combination of factors, including a greater focus on social and emotional development as part of the educational mission of younger grades, greater scholarly interest in early intervention, and the strong emphasis in education policy at the high school level on academic outcomes and standardized test scores. As a result, few SEL programs are designed specifically for high school contexts and many (although not all) of the programs that currently exist for high school students are upward expansions of elementary and middle school programs.
What does this report include?

- Key SEL skills & instructional practices
- Key features of effective SEL programs
- Best practices for high-quality SEL
- Common program components that support effective and high-quality SEL

Chapter 1

- Common characteristics that underlie both SEL & OST programming
- Considerations for adapting SEL programs to OST settings

Chapter 2

- General principles of equitable SEL
- Barriers to achieving equitable SEL
- Best practices for equitable SEL
- How equitable practices can be integrated into SEL lessons

Chapter 3

- Common principles underlying SEL & trauma-sensitive schooling
- Best practices for trauma-informed SEL

Chapter 4

- Table 1 comparing program skill focus
- Table 2 comparing program strategies
- Table 3 comparing program components

Chapter 5

- Detailed program profiles for 18 middle and high school SEL programs
- Information about each program’s structure, effectiveness, curricular content, key components/supports, and unique features compared to other programs

Chapter 6

How can this report be used?

This guide provides detailed and transparent information about commonly used, evidence-based SEL programs. By breaking down each program in detail, this report enables schools and out-of-school time (OST) organizations to see whether and how well individual programs might:

- address their intended SEL goals or needs (e.g., bullying and violence prevention, character education, behavior management, college and career readiness, resistance to peer pressure/refusal skills, etc.);
- align with a specific mission (e.g., promoting physical fitness, community service, literacy, etc.);
- meet the specific social, emotional, and behavioral needs of their students (e.g., stress management, conflict resolution, academic motivation, identity development, goal setting, etc.);
- fit within their schedule or programmatic structure;
- integrate into existing school climate and culture initiatives, positive behavioral supports, and/or trauma-informed systems;
- complement other educational or programmatic goals outside of SEL (e.g., a school looking to boost student literacy scores or make up for the lack of an arts program might consider selecting a program that frequently incorporates reading and writing activities or a lot of acting and role play);
- ensure that SEL programming is equitable (i.e., relevant, beneficial, and culturally appropriate for all students); and
- bridge OST settings and the regular school day.

This type of information can be used by schools and OST organizations to: (1) select specific programs or strategies that best meet their individual needs; (2) guide planning and goal-setting conversations with school and district leaders, OST partners, and other stakeholders; and/or (3) reevaluate the fit and effectiveness of SEL programs and supports already in use.

To continue reading the full guide, please visit: